Tomma Abts

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Foreword by
Lisa Phillips

Essays by
Laura Hoptman
Jan Verwoert
and **Bruce Hainley**

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Contents

Foreword

Tomma Abts' paintings have been described as quiet, uncanny, and disquieting. They seem autonomous; her uncompromising biomorphic and geometric forms do not portray a subject but instead, in the artist's own words, become something "quite physical and therefore 'real.'" It is the strange and evocative presence of these paintings, along with the questions they pose to current discourses in painting, that make this exhibition especially relevant today.

Tomma Abts and Laura Hoptman, Kraus Family Senior Curator, have worked closely on the development of the exhibition and the production of this book. We are extremely grateful to the artist for sharing her vision and energy, and to Laura Hoptman for her commitment to the artist's work and for championing this first U.S. exhibition and major publication. She has also provided a thoughtful look at Abts' paintings that offers new insight into how the artist's works relate to historical abstraction, as well as the telling differences that set Abts' work apart.

Bruce Hainley and Jan Verwoert also contributed texts to the book that greatly illuminate Abts' work. Hainley's blog-inspired text not only offers a narrative of personal discovery and examination of Abts' paintings, but the blog structure presents an interesting parallel to Abts' process. Verwoert's essay is an engrossing look at the politics of abstraction, and he offers clear reasons why Abts' work is so relevant to our contemporary culture.

We are very pleased that the exhibition will travel to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. I would like to thank our Hammer colleagues Ann Philbin, Director; Gary Garrels, Chief Curator; and Ali Subotnick, Curator. All three are enthusiastic Abts supporters and willingly signed on as a venue for the exhibition early in the development of the project.

The exhibition would not have been possible without the support of Hilary and Peter Hatch and the Lily Auchincloss Foundation. Additional support for the exhibition was provided by the

Toby Devan Lewis Emerging Artists Exhibitions Fund, and support for the publication by the J. McSweeney and G. Mills Publications Fund at the New Museum.

We deeply appreciate the cooperation of the lenders to the exhibition, who are thanked individually elsewhere. Finally, I want to give my thanks to the entire New Museum staff for their efforts in bringing Tomma Abts' work to a wider audience.

Lisa Phillips
Toby Devan Lewis Director, New Museum

Acknowledgments

Working on a monographic exhibition of a living artist is a completely different experience from creating a group show in part because it is a kind of self-portrait of that artist—personal, intimate, and reflective of what that artist wants her work to say to her audience. This is the case with this first solo exhibition in the U.S. of Tomma Abts' paintings. It has been her exhibition from start to finish, and it is she who deserves first acknowledgment for her concentration and dedication. She has the New Museum's deepest thanks, and mine as well. It is a privilege to show her beautiful work.

The creation of this monographic publication, on the other hand, has been a fascinating collaboration between the artist, our essay contributors, our designers, the New Museum, and Phaidon. It reflects us all. We are proud that it is the first of its kind for this artist, and are sure that it heralds much rich and controversial scholarship to come.

There are many others who have contributed to making this vision a reality. At the New Museum my thanks go to Lisa Phillips, the *Toby Devan Lewis Director*; Lisa Roumell, our former Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer; John Hatfield, Deputy Director; Alice Arias, Director of Finance & Administration; and my curatorial colleagues, Richard Flood, Chief Curator; Massimiliano Gioni, Director of Special Projects; Benjamin Godsill, Curatorial Associate; and Amy Mackie, Curatorial Assistant. First Benjamin, then Amy worked on the details of the exhibition and the book, neither of which could have happened without their detail-oriented organizational abilities. Oksana Salamatina and Shari Zolla expertly discharged their registrarial duties, and Hendrik Gerrits, Joshua Edwards and their crew installed the show flawlessly. Eungie Joo, Curator and Director of Education and Public Programs, enriched the visitor experience of the exhibition, and Regan Grusy, Director of Development, and her team worked tirelessly with our generous funders. Without all of them, the show would not have been possible.

In the creation of this publication, special thanks are due to Melanie Cohn, the New Museum Publications Manager and the book's co-editor. Melanie guided the production of this volume until its final stages with equanimity and expertise. Craig Garrett at Phaidon Press gave invaluable input editorially and contributed his expertise to the overall design of the book. The New Museum is particularly grateful to Phaidon publisher Richard Schlagman, whose enthusiasm for Abts made the partnership between the museum and Phaidon happen, brilliantly, and on short notice.

This publication is a special one, and this is due not only to Tomma's work and Melanie's and Craig's care, but to a beautiful design by Miko McGinty and the important contributions by guest essayists Bruce Hainley and Jan Verwoert. Our deepest thanks to all.

Our colleagues at the Hammer Museum—Ann Philbin, Director; Gary Garrels, Chief Curator; and Ali Subotnick, Curator—are enthusiastic Tomma Abts supporters who made a West Coast venue possible.

Tomma's representatives all participated in this exhibition, supporting it with generous contributions of information, diplomacy, and discernment. Cornelia Grassi and Lindsay Jarvis of greengrassi in London, Daniel Buchholz and Christopher Müller of Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne, David Zwirner and Bellatrix Hubert of David Zwirner gallery in New York, and Giti Nourbakhsch of Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch in Berlin all deserve our thanks. Cornelia in particular was an advocate both for the artist and for this exhibition from its inception. Christopher provided invaluable suggestions for the book, and Bella gave crucial help with photography and storage when we needed it most.

The exhibition has been funded by the Lily Auchincloss Foundation and Hilary and Peter Hatch. We are very grateful to them.

Tomma's collectors also must be singled out for the generous loan of their works. That Tomma and I know most of them personally is a testament to their involvement with the artist's vision. We are grateful to them for their crucial contribution to this benchmark show.

Laura Hoptman
Kraus Family Senior Curator, New Museum

Tomma Abts: Art for an Anxious Time

Laura Hoptman

I. The Binaries of Abstraction

Art history is an Enlightenment-born discipline, and, true to this history, it describes objects by comparing and contrasting them with their familiars. Ever since abstraction was introduced into western European art at the beginning of the twentieth century, art history has defined it in a similar way, through opposing typologies. Binary categories were erected both to describe and to justify the emergence of an artistic language that seemed to free itself from subject matter to concentrate instead on content. One hundred years later, the task of describing it remains daunting. It is difficult to state whether or not most of us understand what abstraction is at this moment in history, although we have clearly accepted it as figuration's opposite, as well as its successor in a teleology of Western art history that came to an abrupt end about thirty or so years ago.

Abstraction as an essential expression of an idea or feeling, rather than as a representation of an object from the real world, is the most straightforward binary definition. As the art historian Meyer Schapiro pointed out, all art is representational, and although a work of art does not necessarily need to have a subject, it always has content, communicated by the fundamental elements of picture-making: color, line, depth, flatness.[1] The purity of an abstract composition is a frequent topic of discussion in the historical literature of abstraction, and this purity is judged against the composition's resemblance to nature. For purists like Kasimir Malevich or Piet Mondrian, it was essential that the two-dimensionality of the picture plane be respected. The hints of shading and depth of field in compositions by Wassily Kandinsky or František Kupka attached them to the visible world, and in Malevich's opinion, signaled a betrayal of the absolute realism of a geometric shape on a flat surface.[2]

Malevich's almost religious allegiance to the formal properties of the medium notwithstanding, he shared with Kandinsky and Mondrian the notion that abstraction was peculiarly suited

to the expression of the spiritual, if not the transcendent. Certain pre-World War I European abstractionists — Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Kupka the best known among them — might have agreed with Walt Whitman, who claimed that God could be described in the form of a simple square. For the chroniclers of the history of abstraction, this visionary and sometimes expressionistic[3] version of "symbolic" or "transcendental" abstraction gave way in the decades after World War II to a decidedly structural one. Taking as inspiration Malevich's notions of the concrete "realism" of a non-illusionistic, two-dimensional form, as well as Mondrian's parameters of form and color, some postwar abstractionists — among them Piero Manzoni and the so-called "hard-edge" American painters Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly — created abstract objects, self-contained, non-relational and decidedly inorganic in the logic of their composition.

These oppositions — biomorphic versus geometric, illusionistic versus anti-illusionistic, transcendental versus structural, expressionistic versus hard-edged — together function as a definition of abstraction over the past century. They also serve as a kind of teleology of abstraction, which, if followed, ended perhaps twenty years ago with abstraction's death by a thousand irrelevancies, the largest being the final repudiation of formalism and, with it, the faith in content over subject matter. When Tomma Abts' small, dour paintings first came to public attention at the turn of this new millennium, abstraction was not widely found among young artists practicing in centers like London, Berlin, or New York. Painting of a decidedly narrative kind, with roots equally in old master paintings and vernacular illustration, was the focus, guiding the discourse towards a happy-go-lucky visuality, delightful to the eye and amusing, in an untaxing way, to the brain. In this climate, Abts' paintings delivered a shock: each of their elements was counter to prevailing tastes.[4] In the first place, they were small, each canvas measuring an extremely modest 18⅞ by 15 inches (48 x 38 cm). In a moment when painters, in a flush of confidence that comes from popularity, were ramping up the proportions of their works from easel to mural size, Abts' handful of little pictures arranged around a fairly commodious gallery at first seemed modest in a stubborn, even slightly mean way. This first impression was immediately mitigated by a moment's concentration on a picture like *Eerke* (2000). Painted edge to edge with a precision that was not fussy but accurate like a rapier slash, *Eerke* had an intensity — a presence — that completely belied its small size. What was true for *Eerke* was true for all of the dozen or so paintings in this early ensemble. Each one was like a magnet, a vacuum, a vortex — sucking space and concentration. The effect was powerful and thrilling.

The composition of *Eerke* is deceptively straightforward, consisting of a series of triangular shapes ranged like teeth around the periphery of the picture plane. Unevenly spaced and in some cases slightly overlapping, the triangles seem to possess the thickness of blades in a shallow three-dimensional space. This trompe l'oeil relief effect is created entirely by subtle gradations of color, a combination of violets and midnight blues poised between natural and unearthly. Abts' colors and color combinations are arresting because they are unfamiliar and because they dare us to recalibrate our deepest assumptions about color, a subject most of us feel we understand intuitively. Like *Eerke*, most of Abts' paintings incorporate a highly manipulated palette of often indescribable shades that can seem both muted and extremely charged. In addition to using exceedingly nuanced shades of a single color, Abts also manipulates complementary colors of similar value to magical effect. In *Welf* (2001), the lower half of the painting features an area that is a subtle combination of blue gradating almost imperceptibly into green. This area is juxtaposed but not countered by an upper area of violet, a relative complement to the green below. Despite the fact that this combination should produce a visual vibration, the two areas exist together as a background on the same plane.

Welf is a kind of miracle of color theory, a tightrope act of tone and value.

In a recent interview with the figurative painter Peter Doig, Abts commented that she never knew if her paintings really were abstract.[5] This observation from the artist herself illuminates yet another seeming contradiction that contributes to the oddity of her paintings. As mentioned briefly at the beginning of this essay, one of the binaries established to define the notion of the abstract was the distinction between representions of an abstract form in space—geometric or biomorphic forms that respect illusionistic niceties like foreground, background, horizon lines—and pure compositions of form and color. Although both types of work can be considered abstract in the broadest sense, the former are pictures of something, however unnameable, while the later are what the poet Guillaume Apollinaire called "orphic" and Barnett Newman called "absolute": compositions whose meaning is conveyed by color and line alone, with no reference to the already existing world. This opposition is not merely visual; it represents an almost ideological split between a kind of art that concerns itself with reflecting the world and one that strives to add to it or even remake it. It is fascinatingly difficult to tie Abts' paintings to one or another of these camps. Her use of trompe l'oeil shading effects in works like the 1999 *Uto* allow her motif, in this case a ribbon of careful gradations from brown to orange to gold, to exist in some areas in a kind of shallow space in front of a solid ground. The ribbon loops sinuously on the left side of the painting, its curves emphasized by Abts' signature clean edges of almost imperceptibly raised seams of paint. On the right side of the canvas, though, the ribbon of closely calibrated hues has fused with the background. Flatness is the hallmark here, despite the continued presence of the topographic seams. *Uto* then, can be seen as both a picture of a thing in space, and a thing itself. Its title, like all of Abts' titles, reinforces the duality. *Uto*, like *Eerke* and *Welf*, sounds like and might well be a proper name, but its etymology is entirely opaque. Easily pronounceable yet conclusively inexplicable, *Uto* perfectly describes an inchoate combination of pleasure and disquiet that the viewer experiences in contemplation of this kind of hybrid abstraction—symbolic and structural, illusionistic and absolutist.

II. Abstraction and Morality

The literature of the history of abstraction reveals not only a nineteenth-century European obsession with binary systems, but what might be seen as a very twentieth-century absorption with an ethics of form. Given that abstraction substitutes ineffable content for the more substantive subject matter, it is striking how many times the notion of morality is mentioned in conjunction with its development from the first to the last years of the twentieth century. From Kandinsky to Clive Bell and Roger Fry, from Michael Fried to Donald Judd, the term "moral" is used to characterize the act of creating a form not yet in the world, as opposed to imitating one that already exists.

Because the abstract is by definition anti-anecdotal, it can strive for timelessness as a strategy not necessarily to supersede quotidian issues but to address them in a broader way. "Abstraction," wrote the early twentieth-century aesthetician Wilhelm Worringer, "creat[es] a world beyond appearance, an absolute in which it may rest from the agony of the relative."[6] Writing in Germany in the before-the-flood moment of 1908, Worringer produced a provocative treatise that argued that the reemergence of the abstract impulse in the early twentieth century coalesced with a moment when the political, social, and intellectual situation called for it. A product of the teachings of binary thinkers such as the art historians Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl and the philosophers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche, he established an alternative system of aesthetics, describing the classicism of Greece and Rome through the

Renaissance and up to nineteenth-century realism as an "empathetic" art: sinuous, organic, and at one with nature. Abstraction stood in contrast as a kind of art that maintained an uneasy relationship with nature and the world and, as a result, sought transcendence in "the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline." Abstraction found perfect expression in the crystalline structures of Gothic architecture that both recalled the roots of the abstract in Egypt and predicted its culmination in the beginnings of French Cubism and contemporary German Expressionism.

For Worringer, abstraction was at once a product of periods of profound unease and disquiet, and an antidote to the vicissitudes of such times. Exemplifying the "urge to seek deliverance from . . . humanity as a whole, from the seeming arbitrariness of organic existence in general in the contemplation of something necessary and irrefragable,"[7] it also held out the promise of redemption through remove and contemplation.

If the notion of abstraction as a spiritual retreat carried a kind of moral rectitude for Worringer, for Meyer Schapiro working abstractly in times of trauma was an example of moral cowardice. Writing in 1937, a year that witnessed the inexorable entrenchment of fascism in key countries in Europe, Schapiro accused abstraction of being a refuge from the horrors of modern events behind what he called "the blind of aesthetics."[8] Two years later, in an influential essay by the American art critic Clement Greenberg abstraction would be championed as the most ethical response to Socialist Realism, Nazi kitsch, and American Regionalism.[9] The notion of abstraction as the aesthetic of free-market, anti-totalitarian sensibilities would last throughout the cold war, only to be definitively discarded, perhaps coincidentally, at about the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

At the present moment, our sensibilities are rightly suspicious of such an ambiguous, but judgmental, concept as morality as it pertains to any issue, art included. Still, although it is clearly absurd to express nostalgia for a period that held that goodness and evil could be judged by form, it may not be so untoward to long for a moment in contemporary culture when art might engage with ethical issues in form, content or attitude. The argument can be made that Abts' small canvases do all three.

The attempt, particularly to achieve an abstraction that in Kandinsky's words might "supersede nature,"[10] takes a certain courage, as failure constitutes not only an unsuccessful composition but a devolution into meaninglessness. In interviews, Abts has acknowledged a certain fear that attends the challenge of creating a composition that hasn't existed beforehand. As she has explained, for her, making a painting is a slow and difficult process of addition, subtraction, and modification with no guarantee of the success of the outcome. The nature of that outcome is unknown, as Abts' paintings are intuitive, albeit molded by the parameters of unvarying size and medium and the aesthetic of the total equanimity of interlocking forms. The work comes into being only when it has been finished, and it is only finished when, in the artist's eyes, it has been perfected. Sometimes this does not happen. Abts' studio houses numerous works in production. Some will take years to complete; others will never reach completion. Those that do express a conclusive logic of their own that cannot be identified with any existing system. Although a painting like *Fewe* (2005) expresses a geometric logic dominated by what appears to be a pentagrammatic division of the canvas, close examination reveals that it's not true. Not only are all five parts of the background unequal, they do not precisely converge at the center, creating the illusion of a slight concavity in the background. The two subsequent motifs that are layered on top of this ground are dodecahedral (twelve-part) wreaths, angular in the manner of origami folds. Intertwined they create an irregular, eight-pointed star. Despite its geometric quirkiness, *Fewe* has an irrefutable compositional logic. However, this

composition is not the result of a pre-ordained formula but of the synthesis of many layers of compositions. Interestingly, although *Fewe* seems to rely on an extremely particular internal logic, it is not a hermetic work. With its fiery orange-red color and its subtle trompe l'oeil depth effect, it might not radiate, but it surely smolders, like coals of crystal. At once mesmeric and prickly, it is a kind of anti-mandala, provoking restlessness rather than meditation.

III. The Crystalline

To create rather than to represent can be seen as active, even activist, because the artist herself is positioned to communicate the most profound, if inchoate, ideas in a language that is nonspecific and timeless. The idea that the artistic act can be empowered in such a way has not been a part of the mainstream contemporary art discourse in the past decade, a period which has seen the rise of a kind of narrativity in painting, sculpture, and video that can only be described as profoundly anecdotal. Recently, renewed interest in the healing drawings of the early twentieth-century Swiss mystic Emma Kunz and the reassessment of Barnett Newman's oeuvre might indicate, if not an exhaustion with self-reflection, then a longing for a kind of cultural production that addresses larger, more metaphysical issues in an active, rather than passive, fashion. Without falling into the trap of seeing a contemporary work of art as either a symptom or a result of world events, it is interesting to consider the possibility that abstraction in this moment might be a useful vehicle to escape the relative safety of extreme specificity shading into solipsism.

According to Michael Fried, "The ultimate criterion of the legitimacy of a putative advance in modernist painting is its fecundity."[11] For Fried, writing more than forty years ago, abstraction had a moral integrity because it seemed to him to be the only route available for contemporary art to *keep moving forward*. But what happens when moving forward is no longer the goal—not in culture, not in anything? When binaries cease to serve as the building blocks of progress? When "newer" has become detached from "better"? When abstraction returns as an arresting and significant element in the contemporary art discourse, does it bring back to the discussion a moral imperative? Can it still "survive as a cause"[12] with significance beyond art-world battles of form and content?

Abts' paintings seem to offer a tentative "yes" to these questions. Clearly and importantly, they do not represent an advance in the language of abstraction; as Abts herself states unequivocally, she has "no interest" in abstraction's formal history or her part in it. Comparisons of Abts' paintings with works by Kupka, Wyndham Lewis, or even Jean Hélion yield formal connections that may or may not be affinities or influences. In 1915, Paul Klee wrote in his diary of a kind of art that was "abstract with memories."[13] By this he referred not necessarily to the formal genealogy of a work of art, but to the deeply embedded meaning of form that is the stuff of a significant abstract language. "In the great pit of forms lie broken fragments to some of which we still cling," wrote Klee. "They provide abstraction with its material. A junkyard of unauthentic elements for the creation of impure crystals." Perfect and perverse at once, a crystal is the result of the geometry of nature, both organic and systematic. As such, it represents an abstract form that erases binaries.

If abstraction, as Worringer had it, was timeless, he also called it an "art for an anxious time."[14] Our times did not conjure Abts' paintings, but their anxious beauty could not be more appropriate for the moment we are living in. They are crystalline, and in this moment, eternal. As Klee put it in 1915, "This is how it is today . . . I thought I was dying, war and death. But how can I die, I who am a crystal?"[15]

Notes

1. See Meyer Schapiro, "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting," in *Modern Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 228.
2. Kasimir Malevich, as quoted by Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (New York: Guggenheim, 1996), 21.
3. Because, of course, American artists like Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko certainly belong to this genealogy.
4. See Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997). In this volume, and the exhibition that accompanied it, the two artists made an unscientific survey of the most popular and most unpopular paintings in the world. The most popular turned out to be a large landscape with a lot of the color blue; the most unpopular, a small, yellow geometric abstraction.
5. Tomma Abts, interview by Peter Doig, "Painting in the Real World," *The Wrong Times*, no. 1: 15–16.
6. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Cleveland/New York: Meridian Books, 1967), 23–24. Originally published as *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Munich, 1908).
7. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 23–24.
8. See Schapiro, "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting." Schapiro, a socialist, ultimately argues in favor of a realist art that engages with the narratives of the times.
9. See most famously Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 34–39. Reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3–21.
10. Wassily Kandinsky,"Concerning the Spiritual in Art," quoted in Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*, 9–10.
11. Michael Fried, quoted in Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 169.
12. Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, 236.
13. Paul Klee, quoted in Virginia Spate, *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-Figurative Painting in Paris, 1910–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 73.
14. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 13.
15. Klee, in Spate, *Orphism*, 73.

Paintings

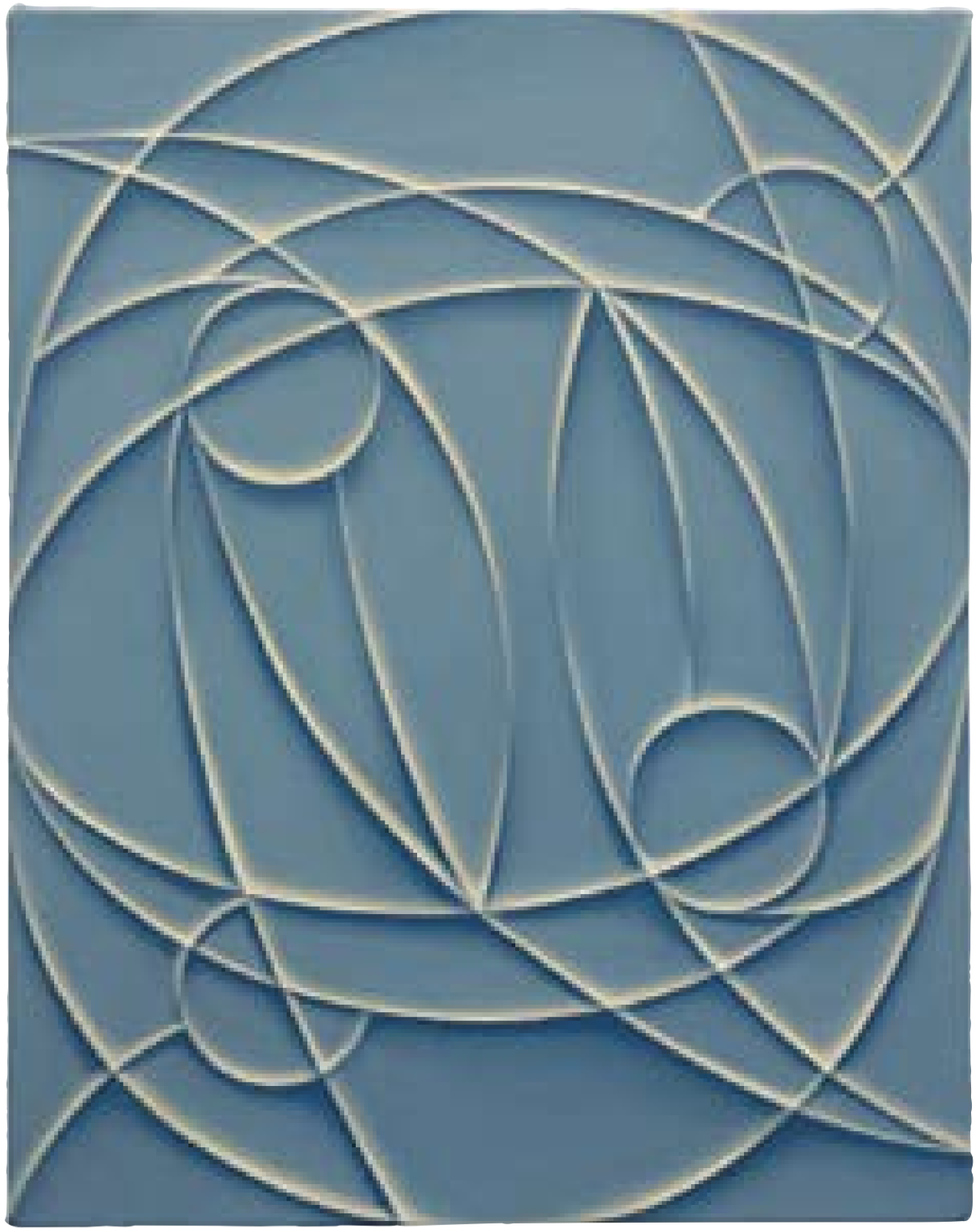
All paintings are acrylic and oil on canvas,
18⅞ x 15 inches (48 x 38 cm).

Nomno, 2001

Kobo, 1999

Folme, 2002

Ehme, 2002

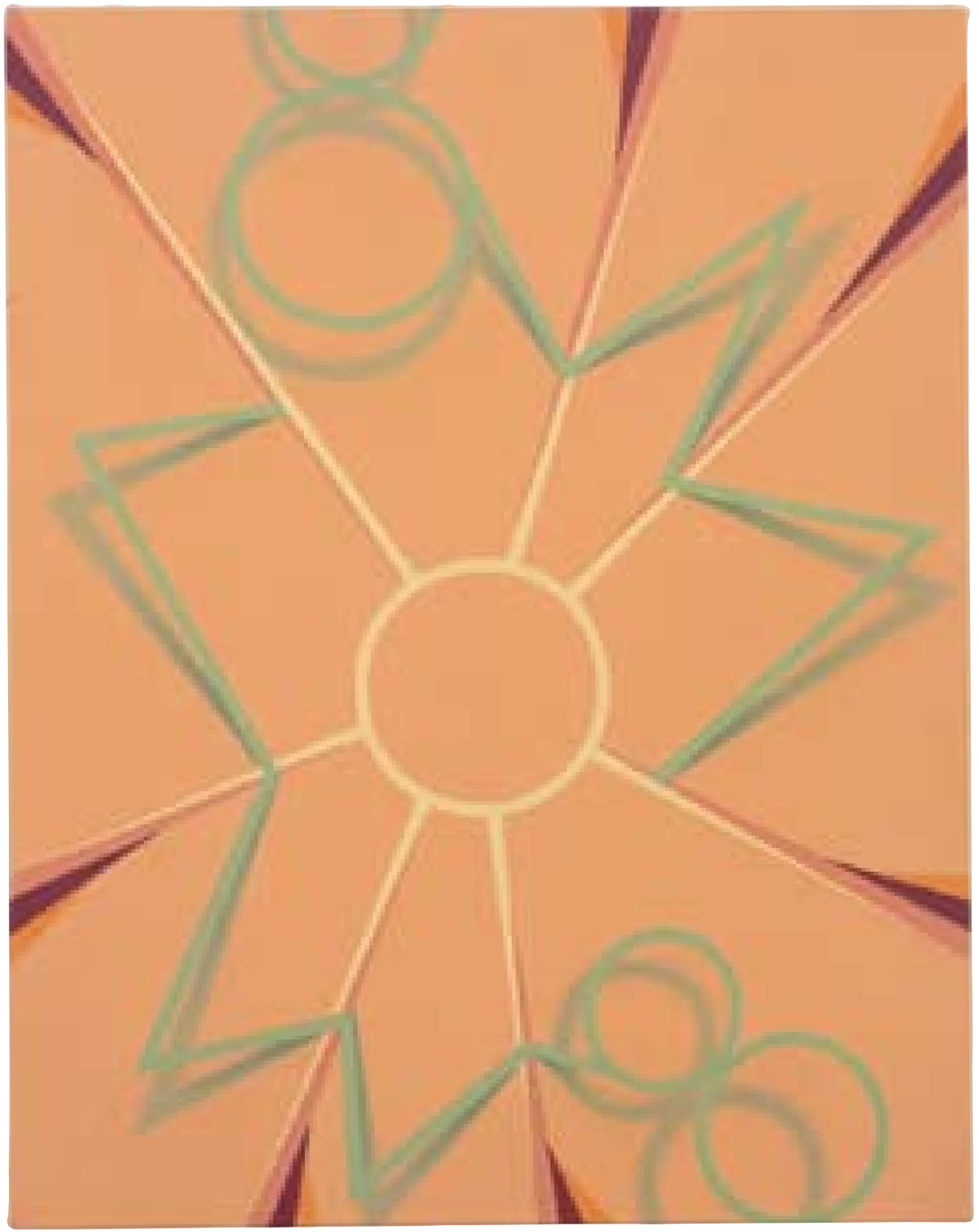


Tabel, 1999

Groen, 2000

Welf, 2001

Keke, 2006



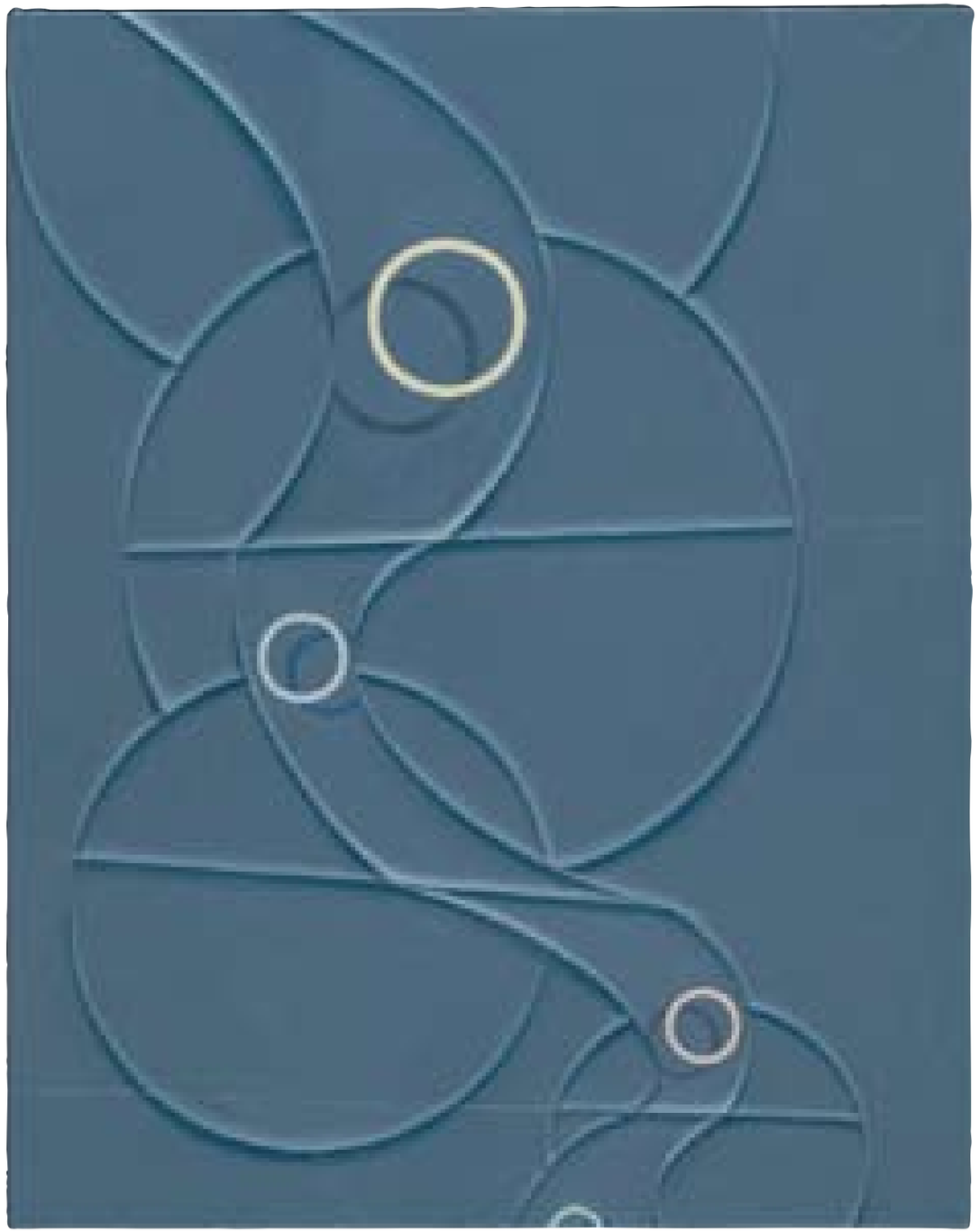
Theiel, 1998

Feye, 2006

Ee, 2002

Soko, 2004

Loert, 2005



Lühr, 2004

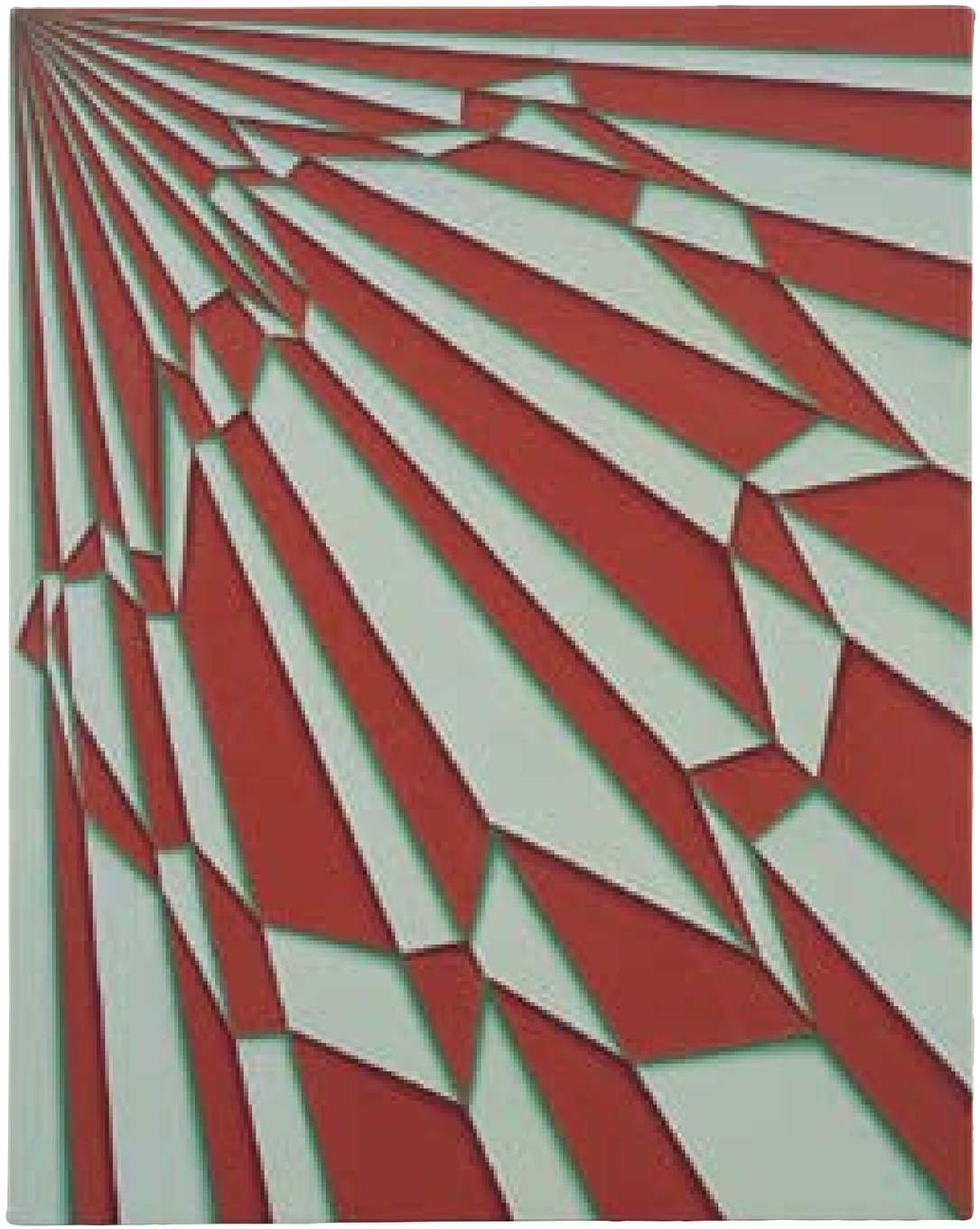
Lübbe, 2005

Moeder, 2005

Feihe, 2004

Ehnt, 2004

Meko, 2006



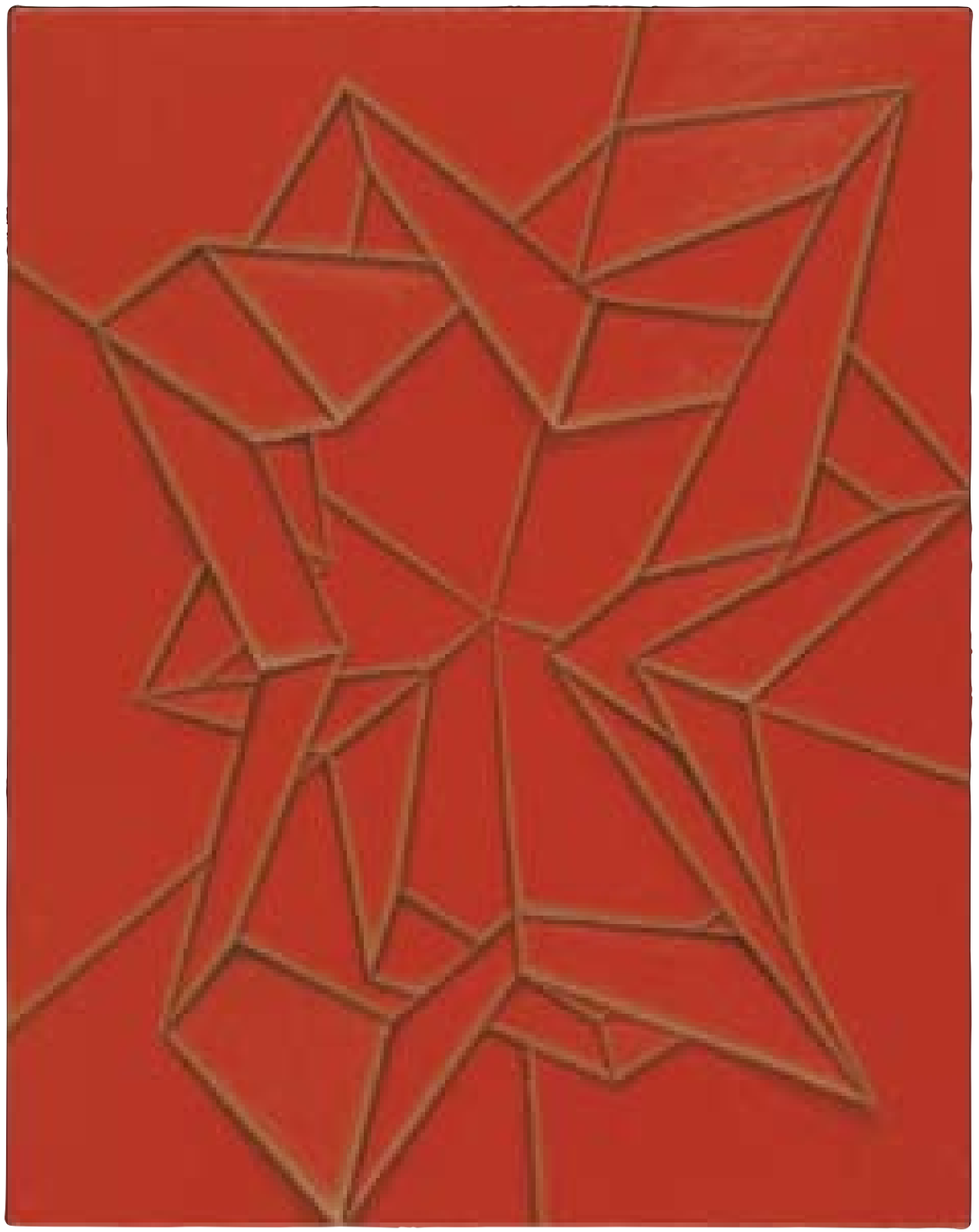
Jelth, 2003

Eppe, 2006

Stilf, 1999

Veeke, 2005

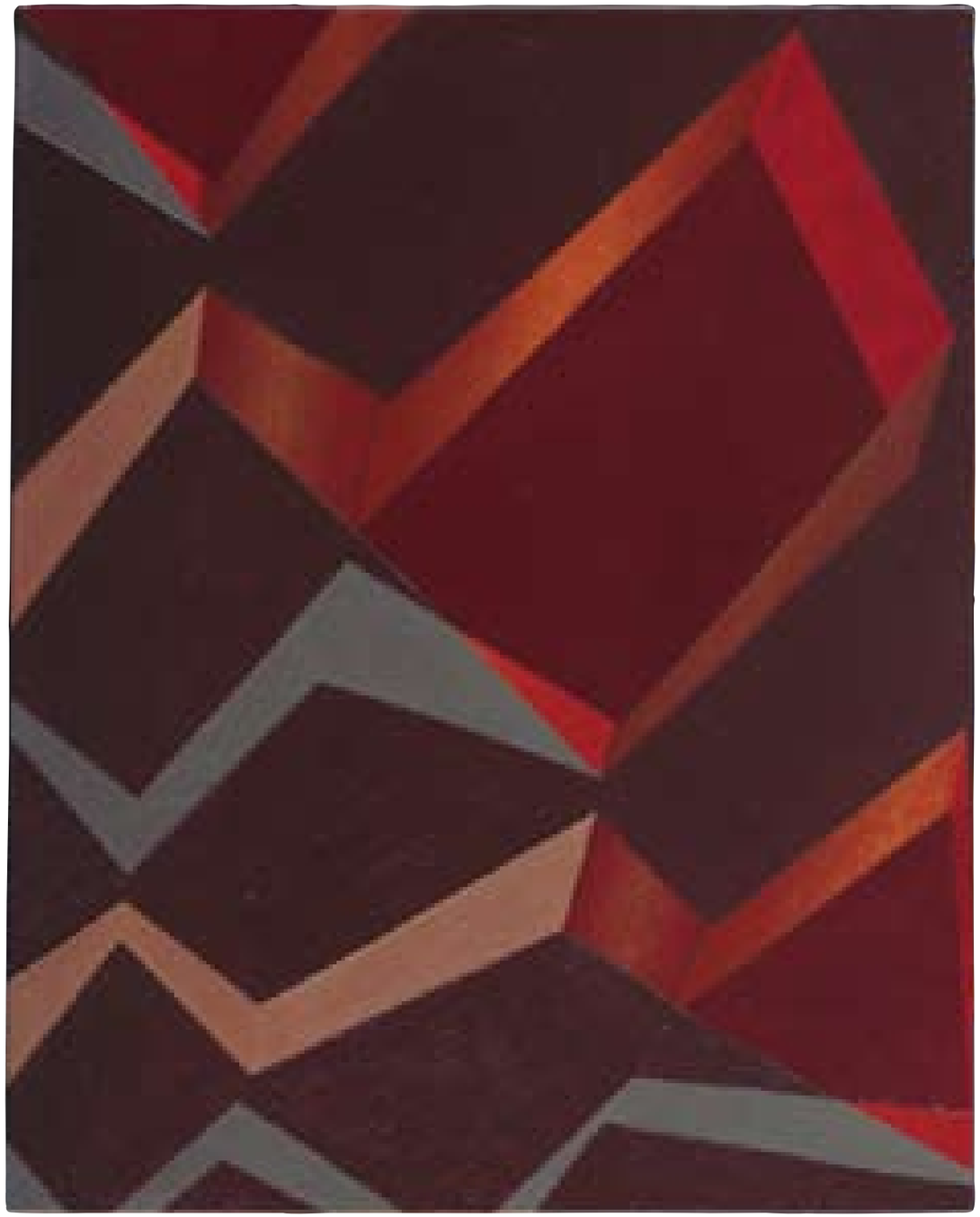
Fewe, 2005



Tebbe, 2001

Jürke, 2000

Zaarke, 2000



Eerke, 2000

Heeso, 2004

Obbe, 2003

Noeme, 2004

Mennt, 2002

Uto, 1999

Ert, 2003

Weet, 2006

Mino, 2005

Mehm, 2005

The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts

Jan Verwoert

I. The Politics of Abstraction

There is something provocative about the insistence on remaining abstract. First of all, *abstraction* is the opposite of *information*. Providing and processing information is the dominant mode of cultural production today. Information is the universal medium of circulation, a currency that supposedly allows for unlimited convertibility, as any image, piece of writing, or music can be converted into and disseminated as data. But abstraction—like style, humor, or love—is inconvertible. True abstraction creates a singular experience of suspended meaning, the exhilarating sensation of the horizon of perception opening up and the mind reeling as new ways to see, think, and feel become tangible. By virtue of its singularity, this experience of abstraction interrupts the circulation of data. It creates a momentary release from the cycle of reproduction and dissemination and takes you to a different place where you see things, for an instant, in and for themselves: singular, particular, irreplaceable, and un-exchangeable. This experience of singularity cannot be easily processed; it lingers and stays with you as its implications gradually unfold. Neither can it be possessed as a piece of information. You cannot *own* abstraction; you can only perform and experience it under the conditions and pace set by the particular nature of performance and experience itself.

A second reason for the provocativeness of abstraction is the mode of *agency* it implies. Agency is today measured by the professional standards of a high-performance culture in which to perform means to prove your ability to actualize your potential on the spot, anywhere, anytime. The speed at which information circulates sets the pace for this. By contemporary standards, an ideal performance is a service provided with the speed at which e-mail travels. Abstraction, however, does not work like this. It proceeds at its own particular pace and sets its own temporal parameters. In one moment, abstract art or thinking might hurl itself forward in time towards the yet unrealized and unthought. In other moments,

however, abstraction only works because its enunciations reverberate with latent memories of things once seen or ideas once thought and then forgotten. Abstraction therefore taps into the potentials of temporal latency in a twofold sense: it reaches out both to that which is not yet and to that which is no longer quite present in the mind's eye. In this sense, the space of abstraction is an echo chamber in which each enunciation resonates with intuitions of the yet unthought and the presently forgotten. This relation to latency is deeply at odds with a culture that valorizes potentiality only when it can instantly be actualized and fully exhausted in the completion of a task at hand. Abstraction, by contrast, treasures the latencies of thoughts, memories, and feelings as a source that is inexhaustible precisely because its content can be neither instantaneously nor ever fully actualized.

Yet in the history of postwar modernism the ideologies both of information and of high performance have influenced the way abstract art is produced and received. In his 1959 conceptual essay for Documenta 2, Werner Haftmann hailed abstraction as the one aesthetic language that was instantly and universally understandable and therefore destined to be a global currency of information on the human condition.[1] In his programmatic writing on concrete poetry, Eugen Gomringer, in the same historic moment, proclaimed that poetry should address its readers with the immediacy of pictograms on airport signboards.[2] In the 1960s the apologists of Minimalism took this idea to its extreme by asserting that art should move beyond traditional reflections on compositional principles—such as the relationship of the figure to the ground and the parts to the whole—and instead forcefully embrace the visible form in its instantly recognizable unity: the gestalt.[3] In principle these arguments reiterate the point that art should approximate the condition of information by becoming a pure stimulus that is automatically processed by the senses and thus requires no further comment or interpretation. Around the same time, the ideology of high performance was enforced in art through the melodrama of action painting. By definition, the action painter must actualize and exhaust his full potential in the climax of an act that, if he delivers, proves his potency and, if he fails, disproves it (in which case the exploitation of the full potential of failure through dramatic self-abuse is the step that logically follows).

We have come to understand since then that the reduction of art's visual language to basic visual forms, instead of making it more readily understandable, is much more likely to render it opaque and hermetic, and the role model of the action painter has been endlessly caricatured. Still, both paradigms remain highly influential. To produce work designed for instant gestalt recognition is the essence of one-liner art that delivers its pun instantly and looks good in photos. By virtue of being instantly recognizable, work of this kind becomes pure information in the very moment that the iconic status of its gestalt is confirmed through the circulation of its image in the media. Interpretation, no longer required, then tends to be replaced by gossip about market value. Likewise, the potent man of action is no longer predominantly a role model for painters but has reincarnated himself, in a much broader sense, in the artist (curator, writer) as entrepreneur, realizing projects under constant pressure. The deeply alienating nature of this condition raises the pressing question of how to imagine alternatives. Reconsidering abstraction against this backdrop may be precisely such a way to reshuffle the premises of what work can be in art. To embrace the yet unthought and almost forgotten through abstraction could shift the emphasis away from the exclusive valorization of *actuality* in the culture of high performance and information capitalism towards an appreciation of the potentiality and beauty of *latency*.

II. Echoes of the Gestalt

It is precisely this new appreciation for latency that Tomma Abts provokes through her work. In her abstract paintings and drawings she subtly and thoroughly undermines the principles of gestalt recognition by creating pictures that at first present themselves *as if* they were unambiguous renderings of unitary forms. Yet when you spend time with them, they gradually reveal themselves to be highly ambiguous configurations, emerging from—and giving evidence of—a longer process of painting or drawing at the outset of which nothing was fixed or given. In front of your eyes, the unitary form of the gestalt dissolves into a multiplicity of angular or curved colored lines and fields. Miniature ridges running like axes across monochromatic fields, moreover, indicate how many layers of paint must have been applied to these fields in a long process of revision and overpainting. In studying the complexity of these forms and the traces of their emergence, your perception is made to shift from the mode of instant shape-recognition to a mode of reading visual forms as manifestations of an artistic process, that is as traces of particular decisions taken at specific junctures in the making of the work (as to how a line should run and where a plane should end and which color each one should be). While looking at the picture you therefore experience how the properties of that picture change the temporal dimension of its perception, from the instantaneity of quick recognition to the durational time of an immanent memory of the work's making—in other words, from the *actuality* of identifying a given form as visual information to an immersion in the *latency* of memory inscribed in the materiality of paint on canvas.

Yet this gradual emergence of complexity is not a straightforward process with a stable outcome. Despite its dissolution into an ambiguous constellation, the initial experience of a gestalt still remains present, as a visual echo, in Abts' paintings. Somehow you still see it, even though you don't behold it in what's in front of you. This effect is underscored by the fact that Abts consistently uses a small-portrait format for her work. You face the works and they face you in the same way as portraits and mirrors, on which we intuitively expect to see the gestalt of a face. The provocativeness of Abts' deconstruction of gestalt recognition lies in the fact that it is not a mere dismissal but a constant simultaneous evocation and dismantlement of the gestalt. Her critique of a one-dimensional Minimalist logic of unitary forms, therefore, does not imply a return to conventional principles of composition. The evocation of something that could be—and addresses you as—a gestalt is still the main principle around which the work is organized. The work is therefore visibly *not* about the tasteful balancing-out of pictorial relations. It is about staging the structural conflict between the dynamics of aggregation and disaggregation by calling the legitimation of unitary forms into question, by putting it at stake.

Effectively, then, Abts evokes the potential of latency in her work in a twofold way. On the one hand she does so by allowing the latent memories inscribed in the materiality of the picture to emerge in the moment when the unitary form of its motif dissolves and the contingency and history of the process of its making become tangible. On the other hand it is through organizing the figures in the picture in such a way that they still resonate with the presence and promise of a gestalt emerging, even in the moment of its dissolution. The shapes you see are thus made to resonate both with the echoes of decisions taken in the process of production and with the echoes of a disappearing gestalt. In this sense, you could say that Abts uses abstraction as a means for making the potential of latency emerge by amplifying the echoes of processuality and form recognition. Abstraction becomes a method for generating echoes of decisions taken in time and shapes lost and found. Each work is an echo chamber in which different memories and moments of recognition reverberate. The echoes are different in the density of their frequency. Some are like the throbbing sounds of bass-heavy dub, with its rhythms internally displaced by being fed through loops of trippy delay. Others are like the strangely transparent overlaps and half-accidental variations that occur in the gradually self-displacing structure of Erik Satie's repetitive piano pieces.

III. Performing Latency

Yet while she deconstructs the logic of gestalt recognition through opening it up to an underlying processual structure, Abts equally formulates a visual language of processuality that calls conventional notions of process aesthetics into question. The process is exposed through slight irregularities of the form, axes that are somewhat askew, or shapes that overlap oddly—small incongruences that nonetheless have fundamental implications, since they gradually make us aware of the total absence of a primary foundational structure (i.e., a grid) at the heart of the work. Likewise, you will find in the paintings that many, if not most, of what at first appears to be lines defined through their own contours are in fact gaps between two fields of colors and thus not positive but negative forms. Consequently, the figure-ground relationship is reversed, if not completely dismantled, when what at first appears to be a figure in effect turns out to be an opening cut into the ground. By developing her language of processuality out of minute reversals and irregularities, Abts defies the ostentatious theatricality of Abstract Expressionism's grand gestures and Tachism's nervous mark-making. In doing so, she refutes the deeply patriarchally coded visual rhetorics of high performance: creation through apocalyptic struggle and climax in melodramatic moments of breakthrough or failure.

Yet she refutes it not by giving up on the potentials of processual aesthetics, but by rearticulating the potentiality of processuality through a different rhetoric. There is struggle, and there are epiphanic moments of breakthrough when figures and constellations suddenly become possible even though, given the contingency of the process of their development, to arrive at anything convincing may have seemed impossible only a moment before. Yet, figuratively speaking, no orchestra is summoned to give this moment its drive toward a monumental crescendo. Refusing to summon this pathos, however, is no gesture of toning-down or deflation. It is a gesture born out of the realization that pathos tends to dissimulate what is really at stake by blowing lots of smoke. The true drama may in fact only unfold on a different, more subliminal and subtextual level. It seems that many of the deeply existential emotions we experience are feelings that slowly evolve over time and therefore exist mostly in a peculiar state of latency, always somehow tangible but never readily graspable. Because their latency is hard to bear, we tend to make scenes to force such emotions into the open in a moment of confrontation and climax. Yet, it is precisely the immanent quality of these emotions, their durational character and longevity, which is obscured in and by momentous dramatic crescendo. Conversely, the language of latency that Abts formulates in her abstract work seems much more capable of evoking such emotions and unfolding their implications.

Historically speaking, it might even be that the drama of modernism in painting still exists in this state of subtextual latency. Maybe the heroic gestures by which some of the male performers of postwar painting claimed to have brought modernism to its climax—and to its end—were never more than bits of melodrama that, in their histrionics, failed to touch upon what was really at stake. That the problem of painting, revealed under the conditions of modernist interrogation (i.e., the problem of the questionable yet inevitable

illusion produced through the dynamics of the figure-ground relationship, a problem that no ready-made gestalt theory could solve) does not bring painting to an end but, quite to the contrary, remains there as painting continues. And it is precisely the willingness to face up to the persistency of the problem in a mode or in a key that is attuned to the subtextual, always latent, never readily graspable mode in which this problem exists, that qualifies as an apt way to address it. Mary Heilmann could be credited as a painter who moved beyond the histrionics of her postmodern male contemporaries and found a way to inhabit the space of painting in conviviality with the specters of modernism, a conviviality that is both relaxed and deeply alert to the challenges and joys that the presence of these ghosts implies.

Abts opens up a similar space in her works, in which the voices of different ghosts of modernism resonate. Yet it is also a different space, more condensed and with a different lighting, where, in the dissaggregation of unitary forms into axes and colored grounds, some figures can even be seen to cast shadows. It is also a space of a particular form of work, one that only emerges under specific working conditions and, through its material properties, continues to evoke these conditions. The traces of many revisions as well as the care with which, visibly, each small decision in the work is made and thought through, make it clear that Abts' work is slow work. Not unlike those of writing, the conditions of such slow work presuppose the existence of a space in which time can be de-accelerated to the pace that the work demands. This space is a studio that is also a study, a timeless place where nothing can be rushed if anything is to evolve, and where time flows at a pace that is significantly different from the fast pace of just-in-time production. Whether this ideal studio/study ever really existed, or whether it is, in itself, more of an impossible, imaginary, utopian site, is not the main question. What matters, first of all, is insistently evoking the possibility and necessity of such a place (i.e., the conviction that it could and should exist) in the face of its systematic erosion under the dominant system of labor in a high-performance culture.

In opening up the logic of gestalt recognition to the immanent latencies of the artistic process — and in inhabiting these latencies in a way that defies the pressure to perform — Abts formulates a philosophy of practice, an *ethos*, through and in her work. This ethos is manifested in the way in which the work unfolds. Yet since it engenders a particular appreciation for abstraction, it also equally provokes the viewer to take a different attitude. This attitude is characterized by an awareness of the potentials of latency, the will to suspend the desire for the instant recognition of things in favor of the inconvertible particularity of how they are, and a readiness to interrupt the flow of information and pace of production by instead evoking latent memories, images, and thoughts through abstraction.

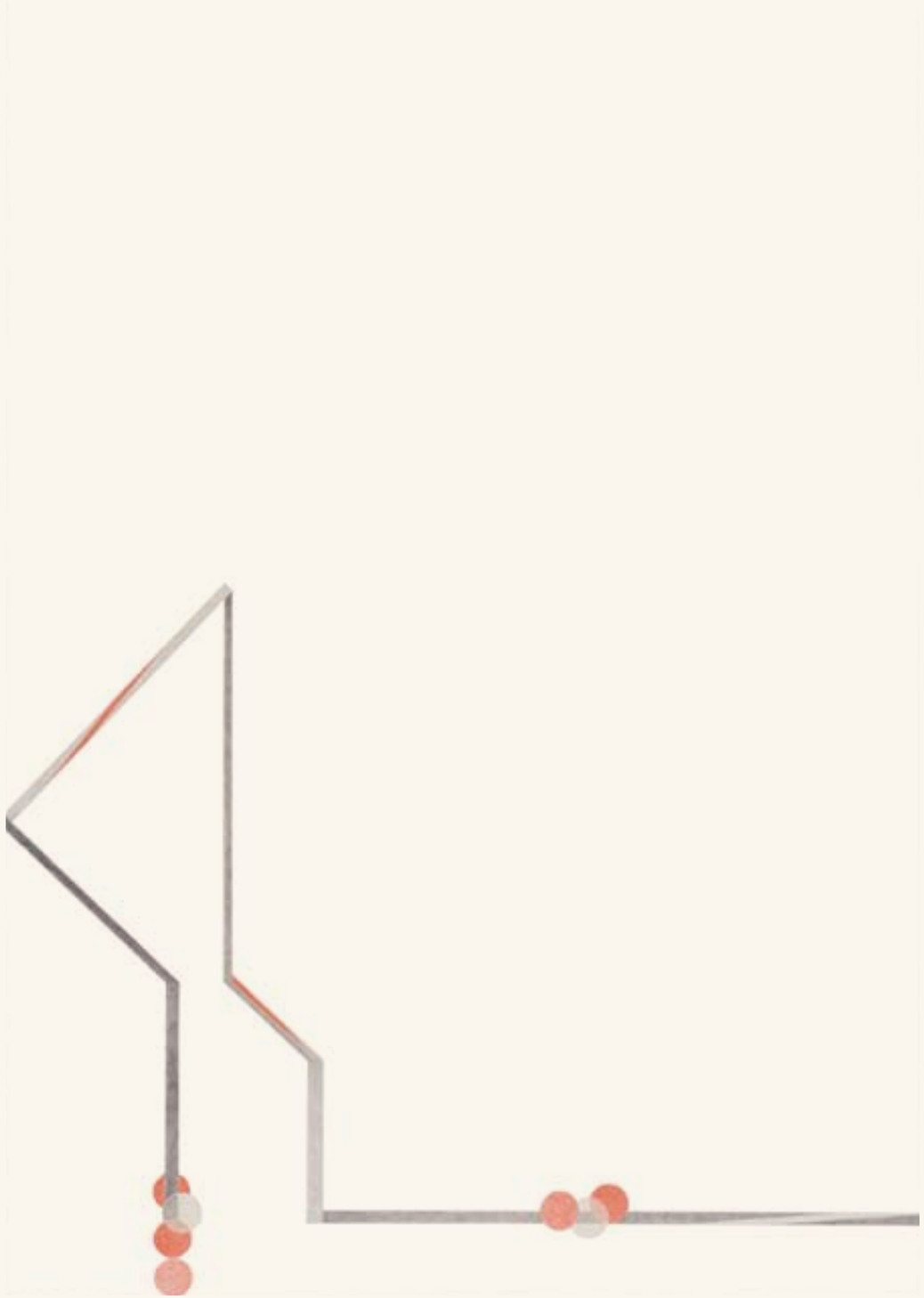
Notes

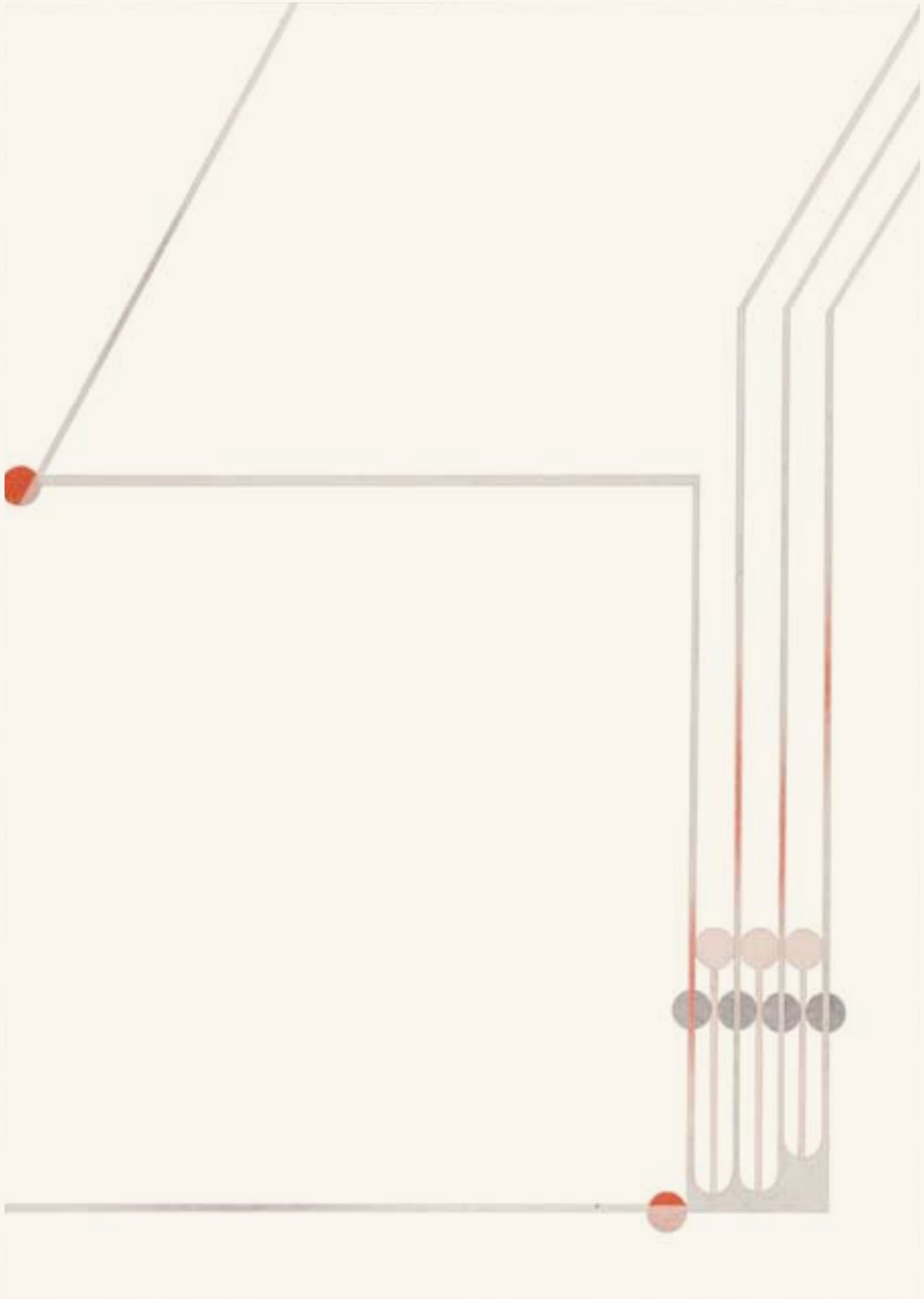
1. Werner Haftmann, "Malerei nach 1945," in *Documenta 2* (Cologne: Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1959), 12–19. Exhibition catalogue for Museum Fridericianum, Kassel.
2. Eugen Gomringer, "vom vers zur konstellation, zweck und form einer neuen dichtung," in *Worte sind Schatten: die Konstellationen 1951–1968* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1969), 277–298.
3. See for instance Robert Morris's appraisal of the unitary form of the gestalt as the key principle of Minimalist work in "Notes on Sculpture," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 222–228.

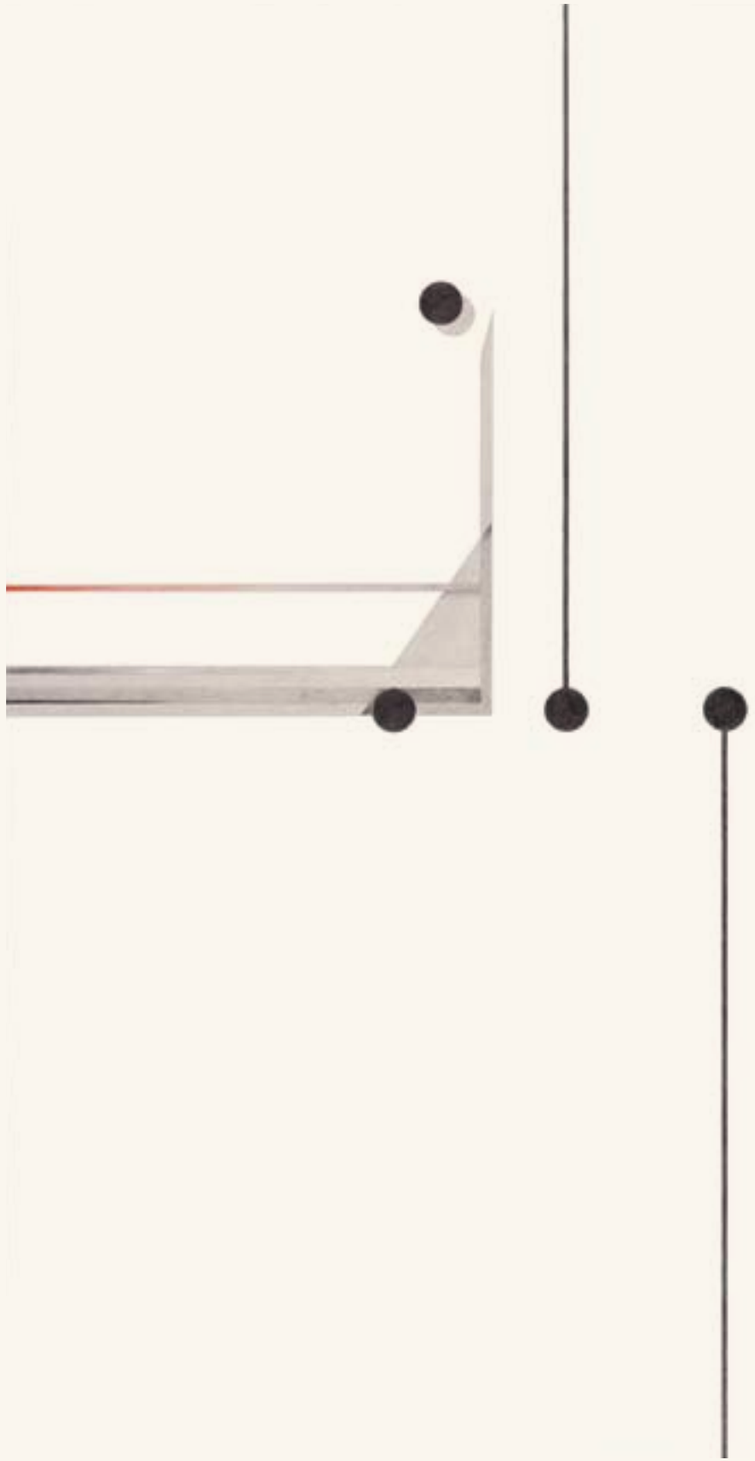
Drawings

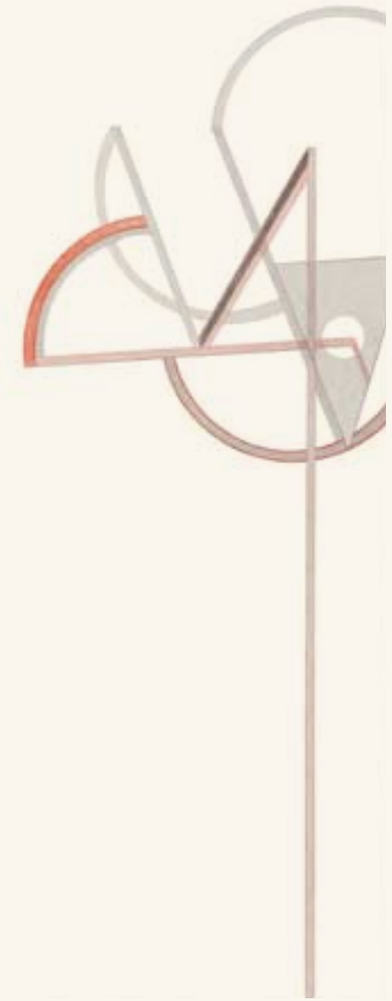
All drawings are pencil and colored pencil and/or ballpoint pen on paper,
33⅛ x 23⅜ inches (84.1 x 59.4 cm).

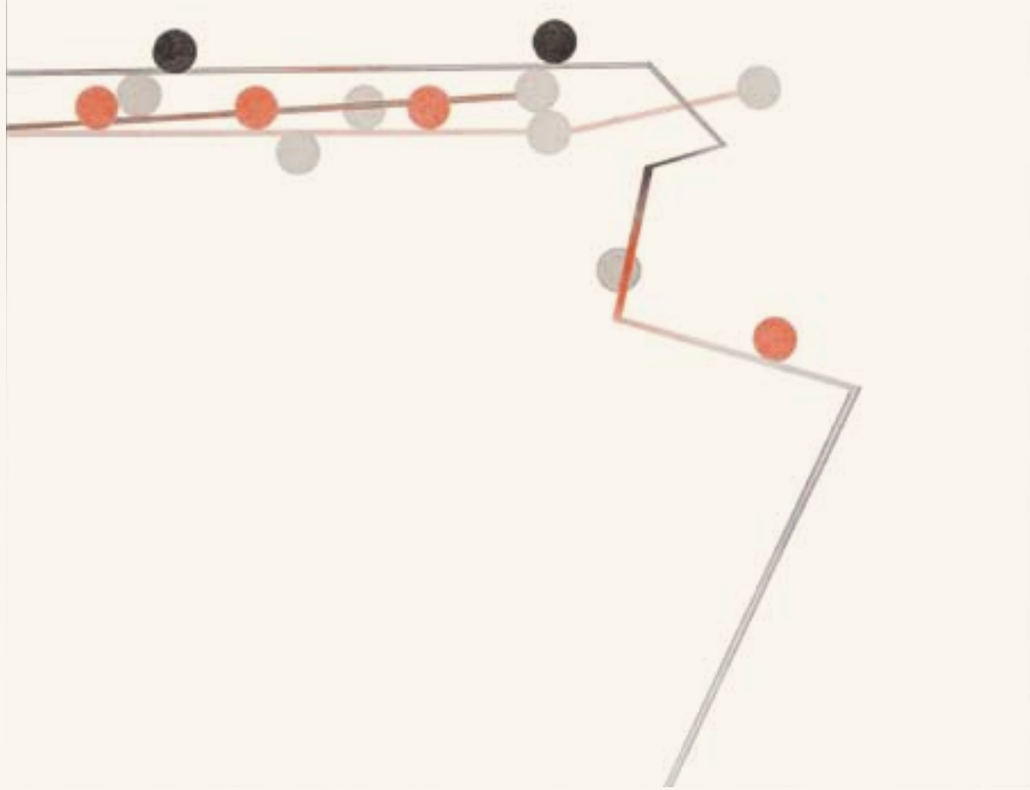
all 2005

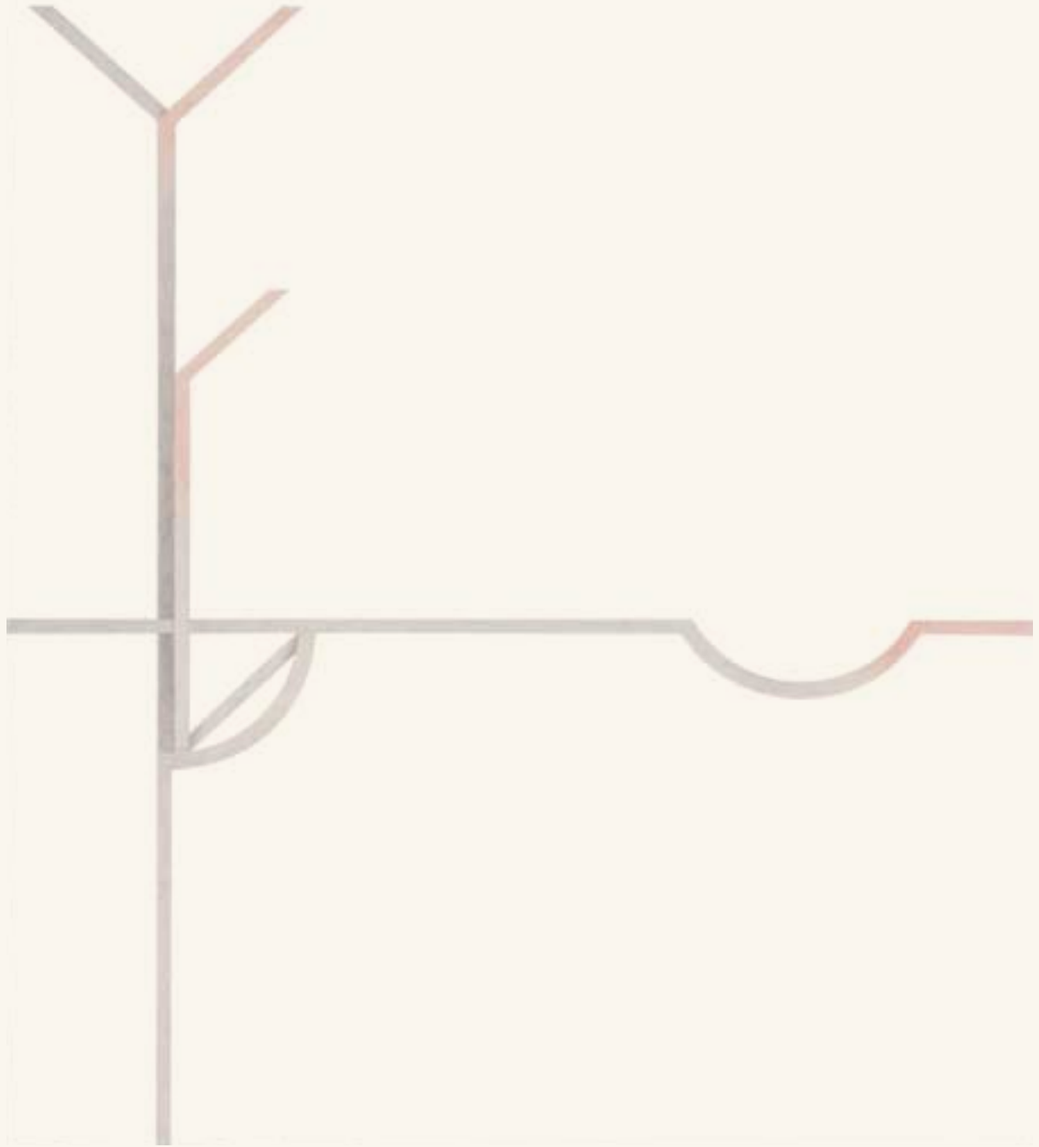


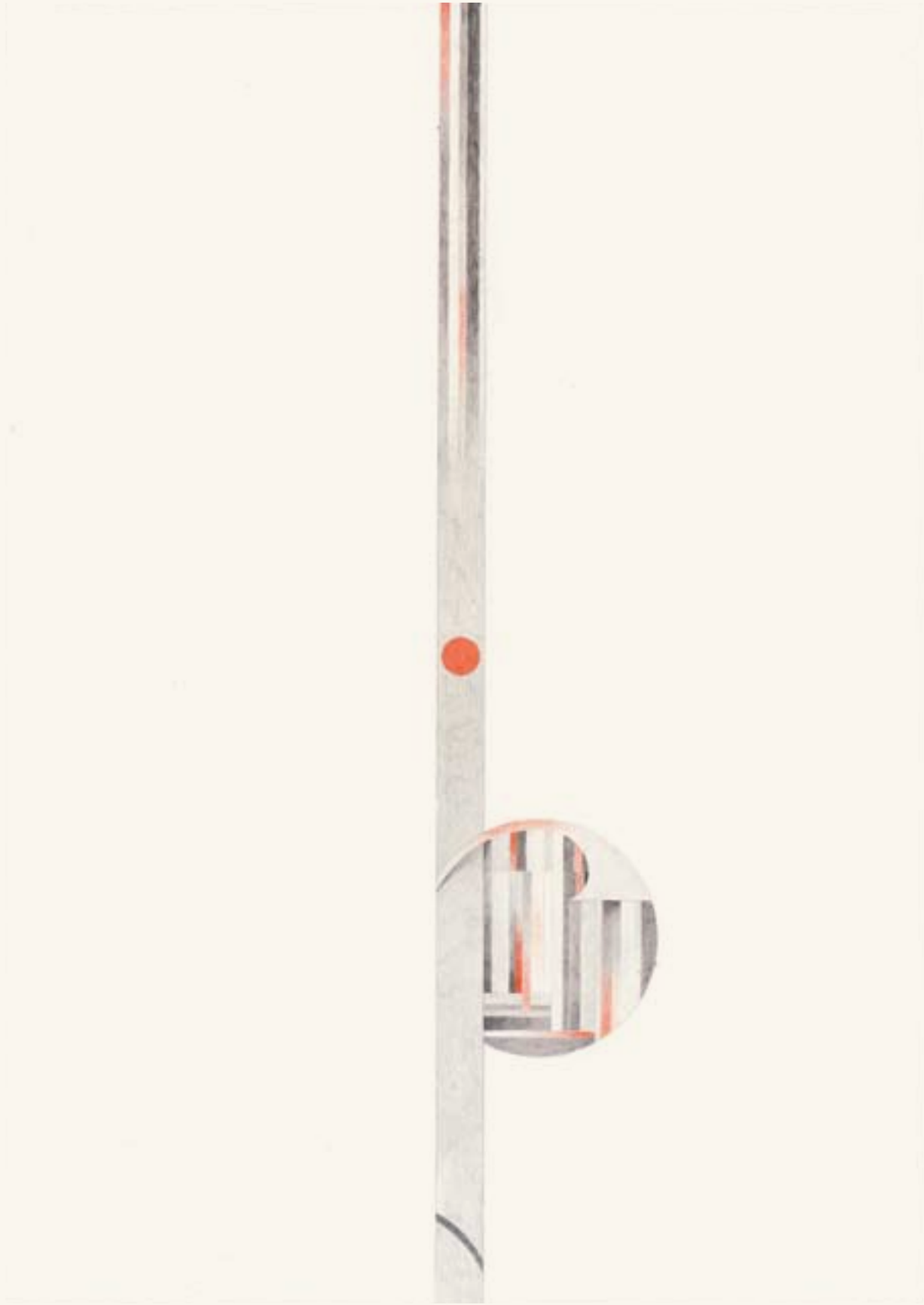


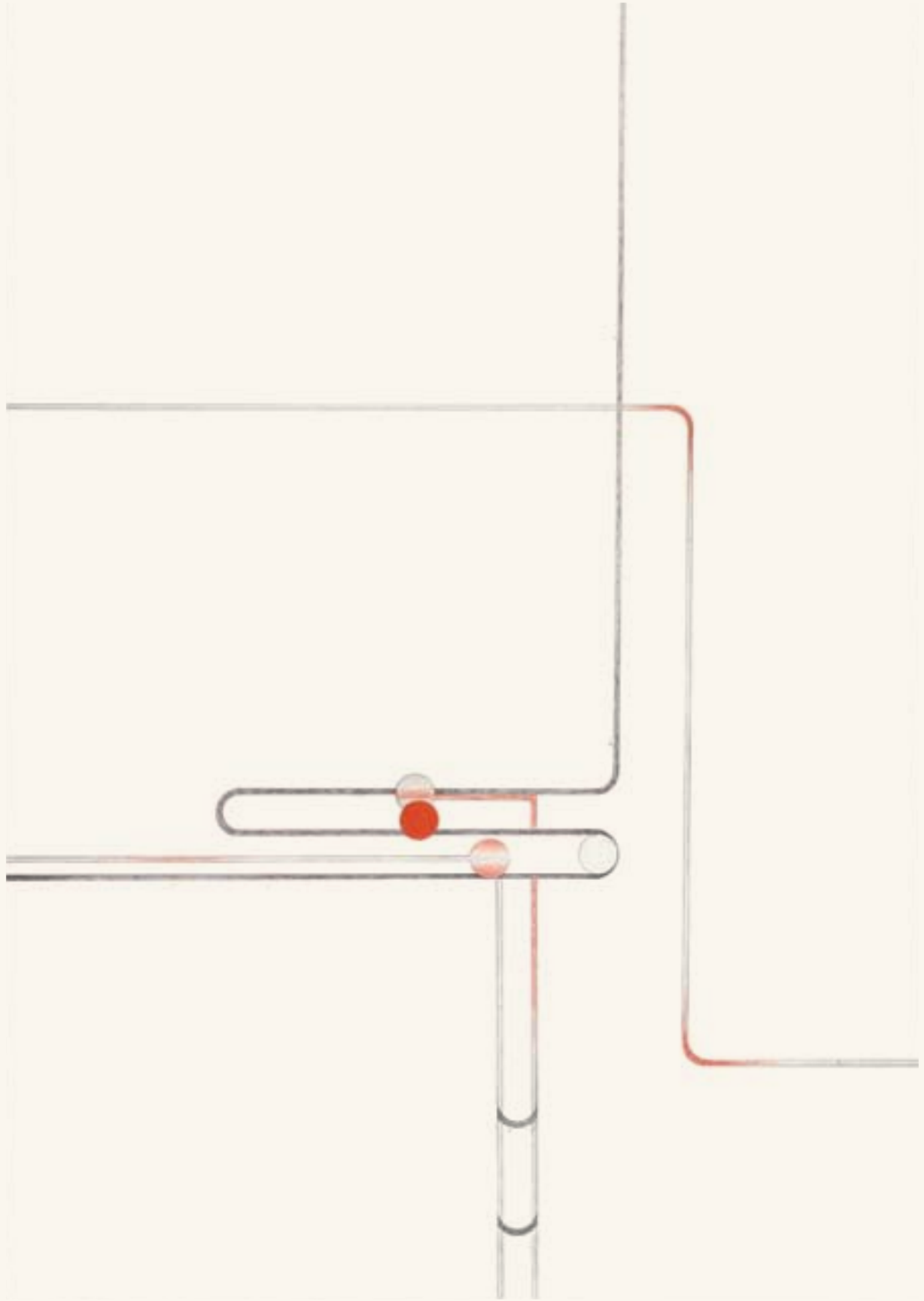




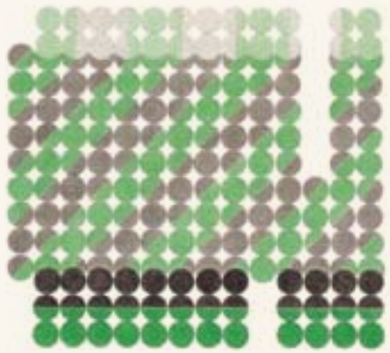








all 2007



MARGIT CARSTENSEN'S BLOG

Translated by Bruce Hainley

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2007

Psychic Hangover

In *Martha*, Martha Heyer, before her marriage, lives at 21 Douglas Sirk Street, an address near the intersection of *Gaslight* and *Magnificent Obsession* (where Rock Hudson, after blinding Jane Wyman, would have become a sadist instead of a beneficent doctor). Watching the rushes of the "sunburn" sequence — my nudity a lobster virulence Guston would have envied — I told Rainer: "You really are a wretched person." He replied: "That's what I've been saying all along." We were talking about oppression. Bringing the pain back to painting. He considered the film a comedy, which makes me laugh.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 8:14 AM 0 COMMENTS

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2007

Metonymy

I swim because it helps me to forget everything.

ABOUT ME
MARGIT CARSTENSEN
VIEW MY COMPLETE PROFILE

Valium, fingernail polish, rock-and-roll music (listened to with headphones that block out everything else), fashion, sex, afternoon cognacs: *culture* is what the protagonist of *Fear of Fear* turns to in order to find a correspondence for her highly sensitized consciousness and to numb it. Normality berates her. The fear of her fear was a fear that everything — including history — had not been resolved or absolved. Rainer's relentless questioning and his "answers" appalled some.

What does a portrait of consciousness look like? Not a representation of it — no metaphor, no allegory — but metonymic palpitation, the nervous system coursing, alive, wired.

The actor submerges into a part so deeply she may lose herself entirely. Thrilling. Dangerous. This is the risk of something representing itself. I, an abstraction. When Abts states that she loves the sound of a painting described as "a living thing," when she uses contradiction to "keep every part of the painting's space engaged in some ambiguous connectedness," she is allowing — opening her project up to — the chance of shadow possibilities, death and disconnectedness. Does anyone see these tensions or only perfectionism?

I do not wish to proselytize for an art of bleeding (joy is, oddly, too rare a quality of much contemporary art), but I see many artists — stingy, compliant — who risk nothing while shouting about their claim to real estate (notoriety), which they confuse with the real.

Could abstraction, emancipated from linguistic constraints, suture us back to that from which we have been forever severed? Skeptical of redemption, I'm not sure I'd go that far. But the resistance to — still, at this late moment — abstraction, non-representation, murmuring states, let me put it in a bluntly political patois: it is fear of the Other's immigration.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 11:02 PM 0 COMMENTS

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2007

Peter Saville Row

I would be interested to know if a sharp mathematician could provide an equation that would graph the arrangement of these lines. While the various angles and vectors might appear to be orderly, something (the human?) causes the series to skid. And shimmer. Hues of the vertical

lines almost sparkle, metallic, as if their differently valued, less flashy neighbors would have to remove heather garments to reveal skin jeweled by such moonlight. The gray ground allows the march of triangles and chevrons to float "above" it.

Is *Veeke* a study of optical origami or a meditation on the impossibility, despite logic and/or rationality, of not reading spatial special effects into what is depicted: a warp and woof, die-cut things seemingly stacked or woven.

Am I to take some of the shifting shades as shadows of the glinting rays?

Consider this surprising arrangement a Morton Feldman-like score: microtonalities, as if music could be made by taking color between thumb and finger like women feeling for the smoothness of yard goods.

Not uncharacteristically, the painting—intervention, solace—secures attention by being the surest thing in its vicinity.

The radio waves emitted from a collapsed star localized: *arrays raised a race razed a ray erased*.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 11:28 AM 2 COMMENTS

2 COMMENTS

Comment deleted
This post has been removed by the blog administrator.

OCTOBER 11, 2007 8:49 AM

▼ FassiLady said...

Margit! I've used your sunburn scene as an erotic device for decades! My girlfriend intended to leave me destitute, but before she could change her will a meat delivery truck hit her, and I inherited a tidy bundle. I feel no remorse, and fantasizing about you made me feel luxurious long before I had the funds to back it up.

I've never heard of the painter you discuss, but I've enjoyed the jpegs. I'm an art historian, one of T. J. Clark's former students. I was struck by your

phrase, "the surest thing in its vicinity." It reminded me of Clark's Poussin diary, *The Sight of Death*. In fact, I thought of you and your daily task and that phrase when I came across this passage:

"The last thing I am suggesting, finally, is that it is possible (or desirable) these days for viewers to enter into that coming-to-terms and to share it. Poussin's world is irretrievably lost. There will be no neo-Stoic revival, no Montaigne to face down the new wars of religion. Nonetheless, I am more and more certain that part of what will have to be rethought in the years to come (standing as we do at the end of one long form of opposition to modernity, and looking, some of us, for the elements of a new one) is the possibility of recognizing—of drawing back into consciousness—those aspects of the human lifespan that the new irreligion has not to see, not to say. A socialism, if that's what we shall persist in calling it, that starts from misfortune, pain, and death. For where else could it start from, in its hour of defeat? And where else *did* it start from, in the long decades when it was first built, from particular fears and humiliations—fears and elations, impotence and intransigence—before it had a science and an orthodoxy, before it was told it had the future in its bones? Affliction and monstrosity, we have to relearn, are always the true faces of utopia—the face it presents as it leaps up out of the immoveable, out of the insufferable everyday."

That's grimmer and more dystopian than I intended, but I hope this will make you smile: I'm posting my comment while seated at my favorite place in Cologne to lunch, Fassbinder's, a café of sorts, where *Kölnischer* women of a certain age meet. I've had too many cognacs, but who cares?

OCTOBER 11, 2007 12:28 PM

MONDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2007

Astrological Snow

I was born in a leap year on February 29th. Since my birthday occurs only quadrennially, I'm not quite seventeen. This is one way of perceiving time.

Blogs are read (more than they are written) into the past, unlike almost any other form of writing I can think of. Each new entry depends upon (to whatever degree) the posting that calendrically precedes but occurs sequentially after it.

However eventful or "durational," Abts' works aren't really clocks but catalysts for change (of mood, equilibrium, cognition) or clocks that never tell a time you wish it were but it, exactingly, needs to be.

In preliminary remarks for a projected feature he never realized, *Cocaine*, Rainer clarified his conceptual subject and vision: "Cocaine freezes the brain, freeing one's thoughts of anything inessential, and thereby liberating the essential, the imagination, concentration, and so on. This freezing of the brain, and this is the example, will be expressed in the film as follows: everything visible will appear covered with a sort of hoarfrost, glittering ice, whether in winter or summer; glasses and windows will be covered with ice flowers, and with all the interior shots in the studio, even in summertime, the actors' breath will be visible, as is usually the case only when it's bitter cold outside."

Take the temperature of the temporal, but *with what thermometer? There are so many thermometers.*

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 5:27 PM 0 COMMENTS

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2007

Domesticities

On location for a thirty-second spot: new dietary fiber supplement. I say a few words about regularity, my healthy heart, and smile. "Location" consists of a few not-opulent trailers parked near, *genau*, a bar. *Festive* is not the word for it.

Is the studio a domestic space, like a kitchen? Or do artists go to the studio the way one goes to an office? "The Factory" nodded to Ford's automation (how ironically is another matter).

Walking back to my hotel room in the darkness that this time of year comes too soon, I saw through a lit window a boy doing homework while his mother (?) cooked.

If Abts paints her works flat on a table, looking down or over them, what is their relation to writing, their size akin to a ledger? Silence or silences abraded, the paintings' patterns, quasi-Op, produce the affect of falling, exploding, or imploding—repeatedly, something tautly unwinding yet

ribbony, simultaneously woven and unwoven. Beyond language's coping mechanism, shadow (or what may be taken for shadow) equals, in verifiability, what "casts" it. Muted, harlequin hues—puckered, ruched, crimped—in paradoxical silhouette cause strange radiances. Sometimes a sudden ("from out of nowhere") lens magnifies the effect.

Your brain's damascening memory after memory, fuzzy, white on white, after a night of booze and final cramps.

This ligne decorates a void.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 2:20 PM 0 COMMENTS

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2007

Selvedges

My nephew was to give a presentation on ribbon in his home ec class. When he told me they now call it "family and consumer science," I rolled my eyes.

"Organdies, satins, velvets, grosgrains, metallics, and natural fibers make up the six broad categories of ribbon. Organdies are delicate, woven of fine yarns, and they often have metal edges to provide shape. Satins have a popular, shiny finish (either single- or double-face), bright and bold colors, and a variety of edges and surface patterns. Velvet ribbon has gentle pile, usually on a single face only; it can be flocked, printed, or backed with satin. With the weave usually clearly showing in ribs, grosgrains are often made of cotton, polyester, or fiber blends. Known for durability, grosgrains decorated ladies' hats traditionally, but modern techniques allow them a range of finishes, including patterns and pleats. Metallics, once woven from gold and silver thread, now replaced by Lurex or other metallic yarns, have always been favored for their shimmer. A large range of paper ribbons, cotton tapes, jute, and linen constitute natural fibers. A specialized type of ribbon developed in France and prized for the elaborate design woven into the ribbon, jacquards overlap several textural types. Patterned, printed, woven, braided, adorned with embroidery, decorated with pearls or sequins, shaped like rickrack, skillfully made like lace, ribbons' uses may most often be thought of as decorative, but by weaving, crocheting or knitting them together larger fabrics can be created. The ribbon industry has adopted the French 'ligne' as its unit of measure."

The actor must resist the selvedges coming undone.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 4:07 AM 0 COMMENTS

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2007

In Lieu of Words

Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, 1943

Anni Albers, *Drawing for a Knot*, 1947

Ellsworth Kelly, *La Combe III*, 1951

Bridget Riley, *Sylvan*, 2000

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 1:19 PM 0 COMMENTS

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2007

As If Warhol Never Existed

Giti explains it all.

The meticulous pursuit of the future; the event-like and/or durational action; both "Russian Cubo-Futurist transrationality" and the "rationality of emergence"; the importance of the paintings' titles, their specificity taken from, apparently, "a dictionary of first names from a particular area." First names of what? Finding the paintings' supposed modernity discombobulating (modernity?), I leaned back and allowed champagne to gladden me. She's painting as if Warhol never existed? I don't think so. What could be taken or seen as retro or oppositional should be considered in the glowing light of the digital; as having no small relation to blogs. Witness Petra's situation unraveling in front of the Poussin: Rainer's point was that art opposes as well as mirrors its situation. Allow Abts' works, not made from denial, to reflect the context—theirs is ours—of terrorism: they become today's ocular grimoire, an apotropaic force. Refusal is not denial; neither is resistance or defiance. There is a politic at work here. No hermit, she deploys the abstract, the nonobjective, to replace "spun" answers with questions, with life.

I believe in the community of the question and worry about its demise. We were looking at jpegs in the dark, a technology that her paintings abjure. At the moment, no paintings are available—anywhere—there is a waiting list of desperate clients. Rainer taught me to appreciate art that makes people desperate.

Do too many critics act as if what they endeavor is science or, worse, the philosophy of science?

Seemingly none talk about glamour, although it announces itself as an important subject—its grammar and punishments—even looking at graceless digital reproductions of the artist's works. *Weet*, glamorous. *Meko*, glamorous. *Eppe*, glamorous. The release of very few paintings a year, glamorous. The artist's not feeling particularly at home anywhere, glamorous. Her conviction that neither "abstraction" nor its history is her subject, glamorous. Warhol would have completely understood the glamour-quotient—extreme—of the artist's project. Imagine one hanging in the background of Halston's Paul Rudolph-designed townhouse, Liza in red crawling around on all fours, coked out of her mind. Hypnotic. (I use this example because it harbors glamour, innocently [pre-AIDS], if

phantasmatically, in a manner almost altogether lost. Replaced by the ersatz and wannabe, the preemptively gratified. Nothing ersatz going on here, nothing nostalgic, either.)

Giti, glamorous. Cornelia, glamorous. Daniel and Christopher, glamorous.

I salute glamour, and I know a great deal about its challenges and tears.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 1:23 PM 0 COMMENTS

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2007

Greige

When I Googled for more information, instead of paintings I discovered biochemistry: "2,2'-azino-bis (3-ethylbenzthiazoline-6-sulphonic acid) or ABTS is a chemical compound used to observe the reaction kinetics of specific enzymes."

Text-messaged Giti Nourbakhsch: Abts?

I momentarily crave disambiguation. While reaction kinetics re: painting tickle me and seem, perhaps, even apt, before proceeding deeper I'm waiting to hear back from Giti.

Berlin: I've counted thirty different grays in a single fortnight. Today: gravel in skim milk. Can you see my breath?

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 4:53 PM 0 COMMENTS

MONDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2007

"von" Kant

Rainer usually smelled of cigarettes, yearning, and leather. Whenever asked to pause for a photograph with one of his female stars, he always assumed the same poses, either leaning on or burying his head in her shoulder—an expression of submission, refuge, and erotic power. As a director, he demanded love or, let us say, voluntary submission.

Eventually, a growing number of people around him were just out for profit; when he was aware of it, he played the despot and let them lick his boots.

My husband gave me the choice either to stay or to separate and go with Rainer, who was offering female emancipation, a subject I would play again and again from a variety of perspectives. *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* was my first important movie. Few have seen it as Rainer's critique of judgment.

Petra's actions are "by," "of," or even "from" philosophy (for which "Kant" is the sign), played out in front of a mural based on Poussin's *Midas and Bacchus* (in some sense, history). I went more than once with Rainer to see it at the Pinakothek. A depiction, via myth, of some of the various consequences of desire—inebriation, worship, hunger, penitence, apotheosis, loss—art direction cropped the image so that the goats' rumps punctuate the limit of any scene. I leave it to you to consider them as signs of lust, frolic, anality, or sheer capriciousness as well as to mull over how Poussin throws every live gesture, catwalk, and groping into stark contrast.

Much has been made of Bacchus' cock, often key lit. A phallic device to tranquilize the feminine goings-on (talk and silence) or mere flat representation in relation to women's being? Regardless, the painting allows the observation of the tensions between myth and *Jetztzeit*, symbol and random pattern, the stasis of painting and the life always somehow situated in relation to it. Of course, similar dialectics dress my mute, long-suffering, or masochistically satisfied assistant, Marlene, and my Petra.

Later, other tensions became unbearable. Not merely due to the taxing roles—any actor's dream—I, perhaps, embodied one of his more trenchant studies of insomnia, shock, and tranquilization's pull. Migraines almost drowned me. It was time for a showdown. Provoked and tormented daily by his snide remarks, I asked him during one of our nightly games of truth or dare—perhaps more bluntly than I should have—if he wanted to stop working with me. After a slight hesitation, he replied, "Yes." I asked why, and he said I did not seem sufficiently interested in him. It hurt, but I said nothing, a philosophical lesson.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 11:23 PM 0 COMMENTS

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2007

Accidents

Home is the first abstraction. It always seems to leave one at a loss. . . .

I was born in Kiel and have little idea to what this amounts. As I finger an old postcard, a general panorama of the capital of Schleswig-Holstein, no recollection occurs; the muted colors convey more than the harbor view supposed to be its subject.

At the travel bureau, I notice I don't rank as one of the city's "notable residents"; a painter who won some prize, illustrious, I assume, is the most recent addition to the list. Who decides?

A catchy song I heard in a club put it nicely: "If you think it's tough now, come to Africa."

A few doors down from where I grew up, an Abts family lived. Did the child make elaborate drawings, apt geometric kingdoms, in chalk on the sidewalk? I'm not sure I'm enough of a Freudian for that to matter, but if mother were still alive I'd inquire.

Should merely the accident of birth cause us to have something in common? The painter no longer lives here, and neither do I.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 2:02 PM 0 COMMENTS

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2007

Hynspergstrasse 2

So tired today. My dosage is off, and rather than a slough, I'm a sloth of despond.

Yesterday, Swan's House of Beauty, at Hynspergstrasse 2, I rummaged—post-spa, Ayurvedically oiled, nadis stimulated—through last season's Philip Treacy purses, their prices slashed. He doted on sparkly reflective devices, as if precious metals had been hand beaten for leopardy snakeskin effects; I resisted, even the silver baguette. Resistance is my solfège, my salvage. Pulling my cloche down over my right eye, bruised plum courtesy of a rough trick, I sped *Play-It-As-It-Lays*-like to Kiel, cruised the navvies, restless and electric for shore leave.

POSTED BY MARGIT CARSTENSEN AT 8:29 AM 0 COMMENTS

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Paintings in the Exhibition

Kobo, 1999
Olivier Berggruen

Tabel, 1999
Mima and César Reyes Collection,
San Juan, PR

Zyja, 1999
Private collection, London

Nomno, 2001
Mitzi and Warren Eisenberg

Welf, 2001
Private collection, London

Jelth, 2003
Hilary and Peter Hatch

Feihe, 2004
Collection of Joel Wachs

Fewe, 2005
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Accessions Committee Fund purchase

Lübbe, 2005
Collection of Joel Wachs

Mehm, 2005
Private collection, New York

Eppe, 2006
Private Collection, Turin

Keke, 2006
Collection of Daniel Buchholz and
Christopher Müller, Cologne

Meko, 2006
James-Keith Brown and Eric Diefenbach, New York

Weet, 2006
Collection of Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann

Fehbe, 2007
Private collection, London

Biography

Born in Kiel, Germany 1967
Lives and works in London

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

2008
New Museum, New York (traveled to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; exhibition catalogue)

2006
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne
Kunsthalle zu Kiel

2005
The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin
greengrassi, London
Kunsthalle Basel (exhibition catalogue)

2004
Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch, Berlin
"Journal #7" (with Vincent Fecteau), Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

2003
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne
The Wrong Gallery, New York

2002
greengrassi, London

2001
Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch, Berlin

1999
greengrassi, London

Selected Group Exhibitions

2008
"Yes, No & Other Options," Art Sheffield 08

2007
"Turner Prize: A Retrospective 1986–2007," Tate Britain, London (traveled to Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; exhibition catalogue)

2006
"Of Mice and Men," 4th Berlin Biennial (exhibition catalogue)
"Hyper Design," Shanghai Biennale
Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London (exhibition catalogue)

2005
"British Art Show 6," Hayward Gallery, London (traveled to BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, and venues across the cities of Manchester, Nottingham, and Bristol; exhibition catalogue)

2004
"54th Carnegie International," Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (exhibition catalogue)
"Formalismus: Moderne Kunst, heute," Kunstverein Hamburg (exhibition catalogue)
"Müllberg," Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne
"Werke aus der Sammlung Boros," Museum fur Neue Kunst, ZKM Karlsruhe (exhibition catalogue)

2003
"Black Rainbow," Lucky Tackle, Oakland, California
"deutschemalereizweitausenddrei," Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (exhibition catalogue)
"Honey, I Rearranged the Collection," greengrassi and Corvi Mora, London
"Hot, Blue & Righteous," Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch, Berlin
"Kunstpreis der Böttcherstraße in Bremen," Kunsthalle Bremen (exhibition catalogue)

2002
"Richard Hawkins with Tomma Abts, Lecia Dole-Recio, Morgan Fisher, James Hayward," Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne
"Tomma Abts and Vincent Fecteau," Marc Foxx, Los Angeles

2001
"The Devil is in the Details," Allston Skirt Gallery, Boston
"Egofugal," 7th International Istanbul Biennial (exhibition catalogue)

1999
"Etcetera," Spacex Gallery, Exeter
"Limit Less," Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna

1998
"The Origin of Parties," greengrassi, London

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2007

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Rhodes, Richard. “The New Abstraction.” *Canadian Art*, Spring.

Thornton, Sarah. “Reality Art Show.” *The New Yorker*, March 19.

2006

Grosse, Julia. “Die neue Langsamkeit.” *ZEIT*, December 21.

Lewis, Ben. “Space Exploration.” *Sunday Telegraph*, December 10.

Searle, Adrian. “Odd but Worthy Winner.” *Guardian*, December 5.

Lubbock, Tom. “A worthy Turner winner. And I think we will be seeing a lot more of her.” *Independent* (London), December 5.

Dorment, Richard. “No other artist seems to be working like this.” *Daily Telegraph*, December 5.

Falconer, Morgan. “Wenn ich mich zu meinen bildern äussere, könnte ich genauso gut das Gegenteil sagen.” *Welt am Sonntag*, December 3.

Cumming, Laura. “Painting Triumphs Again.” *Independent* (London), October 10.

Vahland, Kia. “Fiugobjekte, Metallvogel, Wurfgeschosse.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 28.

Collings, Matthew. “Diary.” *Modern Painters*, March.

Morton, Tom. “Terminally New.” *Frieze*, no. 97, March.

Prince, Mark. “Pluralism.” *Art Monthly*, February.

Buck, Louisa. “Artist Interview: Champion of Abstraction.” *Art Newspaper*, January.

2005

Searle, Adrian. “Is Anyone There?” *Guardian*, December 13.

Abts, Tomma. “The Artists’ Artists.” *Artforum*, December.

Abts, Tomma. “MICROTATE: Tomma Abts on Gwen John’s *Chloë Boughton-Leigh* (1904 -1908).” *Tate etc.,* Autumn.

Dunne, Aidan. “Artist Obsessions and Fantasy Extravaganzas.” *Irish Times*, September 7.

Burnett, Craig. “Tomma Abts: Kunsthalle Basel.” *Art Review*, September.

Schwabsky, Barry. “Slow Time.” *Modern Painters*, September.

Ohnemus, Melanie. “Das quadratische Gespenst.” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 59, September.

Szymczyk, Adam. *Tomma Abts*. Basel: Schwabe Verlag and Kunsthalle Basel.

Preuss, Sebastian. “Die neue Liebe zur Geometrie.” *Monopol*, no. 3, June/July.

Abts, Tomma. “Who are you?” *Domus*, no. 881, May.

Bell, Kirsty. “Formalism: Modern Art, Today.” *Frieze*, no. 89, March.

Kerr, Merrily. “54th Carnegie International.” *Flash Art*, January/February.

Siegel, Katy. “Carnegie International 2004.” *Artforum*, January.

2004

Hainley, Bruce. “Best of 2004.” *Artforum*, December.

Unruh, Rainer. “Formalismus,” *Kunstforum International*, no. 173, November/December.

van den Bossche, Phillip. *Journal#7*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

Hainley, Bruce. “The Consensus Thief.” *New York Times*, August 29.

Buchholz, Daniel, and Christopher Müller, eds. *Tomma Abts*. Cologne and London: Galerie Daniel Buchholz and greengrassi.

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Siegel, Katy. “Tomma Abts.” *Artforum*, January.

2003

Hainley, Bruce. “Best of 2003.” *Artforum*, December.

Slyce, John. “Interview.” *Flash Art*, October.

Burnett, Craig. “Tomma Abts.” *Untitled*, no. 28, Summer.

2002

Myers, Terry. “Tomma Abts.” In *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, edited by Valerie Breuvart. London: Phaidon.

2001

Buck, Louisa. “Tomma Abts: Welf and Zaarke.” *ArcoNoticias*, no. 21, July/August.

2000

McFarland, Dale. “Wallflower.” *Frieze,* no. 51, March/April.

Higgie, Jennifer. *Bijutsu Techo*, February.

Contributors

Bruce Hainley is a writer who lives in Los Angeles. A Contributing Editor of *Artforum*, he is the author of two books: *Foul Mouth* (2nd Cannons, 2006) and, with John Waters, *Art: A Sex Book* (Thames & Hudson, 2003).

Laura Hoptman is Kraus Family Senior Curator at the New Museum, where, in addition to curating "Tomma Abts", she co-curated the exhibition "Unmonumental" (2007). Previously she was the Curator of Contemporary Art at Carnegie Museum of Contemporary Art, where she organized the 54th Carnegie International (2004-05). From 1995-2001 she was Curator of Drawing at the Museum of Modern Art where she organized the exhibitions "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" (2002) and "Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama" (1998) and projects by such artists as Elizabeth Peyton, Luc Tuymans and Maurizio Cattelan. She was an author of *Yayoi Kusama* (Phaidon, 2002) and a co-editor of *Primary Documents* (MIT, 2002). She has written numerous essays on artists including Julie Mehretu, Ugo Rondinone, and Mark Manders, and has published articles in such magazines as *Frieze*, *Flash Art*, and *Parkett*.

Lisa Phillips is *Toby Devan Lewis Director* of the New Museum. She was formerly Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where she organized exhibitions such as "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965 (1995), "Frederick Kiesler" (1989), and "Image World: Art and Media Culture" (1989), as well as mid-career surveys of Richard Prince (1992), Terry Winters (1992), and Cindy Sherman (1987). She is the author of over twenty publications for the Whitney Museum, has contributed to numerous other catalogues, and has written articles for journals ranging from *Art and Text* to *Theories of Contemporary Art*.

Jan Verwoert is a Contributing Editor at *Frieze* and has also written for such magazines and journals as *Afterall* and *Metropolis M*. He is the author of *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous* (Afterall and MIT, 2006), and his writing has been published in numerous monographs and catalogues, including *Monika Sosnowska: Loop* (Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2007), *Cerith Wyn Evans: Bubble Peddler* (Kunsthaus Graz, 2007), and *Wolfgang Tillmans* (Phaidon, 2002). He teaches at the Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam, and at the Royal College of Art, London.

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